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A.D. Nuttall

THE ALTERNATIVE TRINITY

Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake

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A. D. NUTTALL

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

THIS BOOK is about an extraordinary idea: that the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to their fall was an agent of good, was more Christlike than Satanic. The idea is of course heretical but it is part of my argument that Milton's thought was intermittently touched by it. When the book first appeared surprise and some disbelief were expressed at my suggestion that Milton was at times attracted by a special 'naturalist' version of the 'Fortunate Fall'. The traditional notion here was that the Fall was fortunate because it made the Redemption possible, later. The unusual version is: the Fall was fortunate because it admitted human beings, immediately, to an arena of dynamic virtue. In Paradise, before the serpent entered, no one could ever exercise self-control, no one could ever be brave, no one ever had occasion to feel pity. A sense grows that in such an environment morality is somehow bloodless; active morality *depends upon* an awareness of difference. All this, it was said, is surely un-Miltonic. I was surprised by the reaction because I thought it was plainly discernable on certain much-cited pages of *Areopagitica*. One can watch the thought emerging in a cluster of sentences in *De Doctrina Christiana*, I. x (*Complete Prose Works*, vol. vi, pp. 352–3): 'It was called the tree of knowledge of good and evil because of what happened afterwards. For since it was tasted, not only do we know evil, we also do not even know good except through evil. For where does virtue shine, where is it usually exercised, if not in evil?' The tone is at first guarded, orthodox. But in the last sentence of the three a fresh excitement makes itself felt. In Milton's Commonplace Book, long before he wrote *Paradise Lost*, we find the thought in an unqualified form (he is referring here to Lactantius who had the same idea centuries earlier): 'For the good is made known, is made clear, and is exercised by evil' (*Complete Prose Works*, vol. i, p. 363). A page later he wrote, 'A good man by some reckoning seems to surpass even the angels, to the extent that, enclosed in a weak and earthly

body and always struggling with his passions, he nevertheless aspires to lead a life like that of the inhabitants of heaven.'

Quite obviously this line of ethical reasoning antedates the Romantic movement by many centuries. A form of it can be found in Roman Stoic writing. No doubt there is much that is wrong in my book. But not the notion of a Miltonic 'naturalist Fortunate Fall'. This I reassert.

A. D. N.

New College, Oxford
October 2006

Preface

IN A way my brother is the real author of this book—at least, he is the originator (in long conversations which took place when we were both children) of the thoughts which so many years afterwards have led to the writing of *The Alternative Trinity*. He was a fiery Blakean and I an uncertain and occasionally rebellious disciple. But it would be a false piety to ascribe the whole book to him; there is much in the pages which follow with which he would never agree. For all that, my primary debt of gratitude is to him. My second is to Michael Keefer who, in the 1970s, showed me aspects of Marlowe I had never seen before. I owe thanks also to John Carey, Eric Christiansen, Michael Dummett, Mark Edwards, Nigel Smith, and Andrew Welburn, who saved me from various disasters (the errors which remain are of course mine, not theirs). A. N. Wilson replied courteously to my questions, prompted by his *Daughters of Albion*, about the Blakean—perhaps pre-Blakean—story of Christ coming to England. Karen Leeder helped me with the difficult German of commentaries on Genesis. Peter McDonald, with seraphic patience, helped me adjust to the strange business of composing with a computer. Thanks also to the superb, anonymous Oxford University Press reader for a series of corrections, improvements, and challenges. I have—perhaps eccentrically—referred throughout to a modern spelling edition of Milton and an old spelling edition of Blake. I simply chose, in each case, the most easily accessible good edition and hoped that (since Blake is a relatively recent writer and his spelling not so very different from ours) the inconsistency of practice would not cause marked discomfort.

A. D. N.

New College, Oxford
September 1997

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To my brother
JEFF

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Abbreviations

CPW	*The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. William Alfred *et al.*, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82)
DDC	*De Doctrina Christiana* (pagination according to *CPW*, vol. vi)
E	*The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (New York: Doubleday, 1965)
MHH	*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

All their errors were upon this ground, this root. They could not comprehend that the same God should be the God of Justice, and the God of Mercy too . . . Hence they came to call the God of the New Testament, a good God, because there was *Copiosa Redemptio*, plentiful Redemption in the Gospel: and the God of the Old Testament, *Malum Deum*, an ill God, because they thought all penalties of the Law, evil.

(John Donne on the Gnostics:
sermon preached on Easter Monday, 1622)

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Introduction

PEOPLE SPEAK of the literary canon as if it were graven in stone. In fact, like other human institutions, it is subject to change, renewal, and decay. In the first half of the twentieth century D. H. Lawrence, largely but not entirely because of the critical writings of F. R. Leavis, dominated the literary scene. In the second half of the century he was quietly moved to one side. The early twentieth century saw itself, in contrast with the nineteenth, as 'life-affirming' (which tended to mean 'sexuality-affirming'). Lawrence, whose language is full of biblical echoes, brought to sexuality a sort of priestly urgency, a prophetic zeal. A similar potent mix of sex and religion was to be found in the visual arts. The genially incestuous, frequently trouserless Eric Gill[1] went in for erotic art which was not only religious but—still stranger—was 'churchy' in general style; Stanley Spencer painted startling nudes and a great series of pictures of Christ in aggressively English settings.

Blake was discovered as a notable precursor of this liberation, but the common belief among those interested in history was that earlier centuries did not share our peculiarly high-minded taste for freedom, unchastity, and bodily delight. Shakespeare's Falstaff, to be sure, is not 'high-minded' in his affirmation of bodily pleasure, but even so by a sort of exaggeration of scholarship John Dover Wilson felt compelled to argue that Shakespeare's audience would have felt nothing but relief when the new-made King Henry V rejected his old drinking-companion. The lawless, beautiful figure of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* became a test of one's sense of history. C. S. Lewis was very sure that before the Romantics no one could have sympathized with Milton's Satan because it was simply given, in the culture, that God was good and the Devil bad; the hierarchical system which placed God above and the Devil below was seen, quite simply, as right. Milton, Lewis suggests,

[1] See Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), pp. vii, viii, 104–5, 110, 155–7, 247.

would have been merely baffled by Blake's praise of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, as Lucretius would be baffled by a word-processor. Thus a scholarly, historical reaction began to make itself felt before the movement of sexual affirmation had ceased to expand.

The 'Playboy Philosophy' which looks so repellent now was felt at the time of its production to be part of the same spirit of emancipation. A little later the Hippies (or 'Freaks' as they called themselves) were systematically inarticulate Blakeans, gathering in huge numbers, classless, mindless, but full of heart. Gradually, however, it became more and more noticeable that men and women see sex differently (as Dorothy Dix said, 'The reason husbands and wives do not understand each other is because they belong to different sexes'). Skopophiliac imagery of unclothed females, it emerged, frightened and repelled many women. Hugh Hefner the liberator became Hugh Hefner the glossy, economically powerful oppressor. Drugs became a matter of concern and AIDS something more than that. Confidence faltered. 'Transgression' continues as a word of power in heavily ideological literary criticism and women continue to puzzle men by speaking warmly of 'desire' and 'the erotic', while hating pornography.

Clearly, there was a pro-sex movement in the first half of the century. Clearly, this movement is now fragmenting. At the time it was seen as historically unique. The literary scholars especially enforced this view by their contrasting picture of the past as a virtually unbroken sequence of religious orthodoxy. Blake, the allowed precursor, was thought in effect to have created his philosophy *ex nihilo*, from nothing. But in fact Blake's thought is derived from previously existing matter. The libertine ideology was not dominant, indeed, before the Romantics, but it existed. The tradition is like an underground river, which we can trace back and back, perhaps to the time of Christ and beyond. The religious tone of Blake and Lawrence should alert us to the possibility of a *haeresis perennis*, a perennial heresy.

To pursue this 'explanatory heresy' is, however, to encounter a considerable paradox. Libertinism and transgressive 'life-affirming' theology derive traceably from a philosophy which shrank in horror from the created world and hated its creator,

that is, from Gnosticism. Christianity, which defeated this philosophy, asserted the goodness of creation and the Creator. Christianity, against all expectations, after centuries of power, found itself saddled, like the millionaire Hefner, with the role of oppressor, and the pessimistic heretics became the would-be liberators. At the centre of this paradox, having the power in some degree to resolve it, is an alternative picture of the Trinity, in which the Father is a tyrant, not complemented but opposed by the Son.

I

Blake: The Son Versus the Father

WAS BLAKE a Christian? Those who look at Blake's picture of God the Father usually conclude that he was not. The Father for Blake is a jealous tyrant. In philosophy we have been taught to regard the idea of a private language as a nonsense, and it may be that the idea of a private mythology is, similarly, a nonsense in anthropology. Cultures, not individuals, make mythologies. Nevertheless Blake notoriously cobbled together in his own backyard a huge mythology, some of which may indeed be irremediably, disablingly private in character. Parts of it, however, are more public than they at first appear to be: Blake's oppressor-god, Urizen, for example, is evidently Jehovah.

> Our God is Urizen the King. King of the Heavenly hosts
> We have no other God but he . . .
> (*Vala, or the Four Zoas*, iv. 38–9)[1]

The phrase, 'no other God but he' takes us at once to the first of the Ten Commandments, given by Jehovah to Moses. Paul A. Cantor observes that Urizen in *The Book of Urizen* is doing the work of Milton's God, dividing things into categories, establishing time and space, and thus creating the world as we know it. He adds that Blake's illustrations make the identification of the white-bearded Urizen with Jehovah abundantly clear[2].

But in Blake's mythology Jehovah is not confined to the figure of Urizen. He can appear in other forms. The terrible, cursing father of *Tiriel*, 272 (E, vi. 20, p. 283) is obviously the same person as Urizen the 'cruel father of children' at *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, viiA. 107 (E, lxxix. 37, p. 355), who in his

[1] In *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 332; hereafter referred to as 'E'.

[2] *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 30.

turn is identifiable with the 'Father of Jealousy' in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 187 (E, vii. 12, p. 50). 'Father, how can I love you?' we read in 'A Little Boy Lost' (*Songs of Experience*, E, p.28). How indeed? Blake is of all the English poets the one most implacably opposed to patriarchy, but there is nothing especially feminist about his opposition (Freud's myth of the origin of guilt in which the sons rise up to overthrow the father is even less feminist than Blake's). Blake carries his opposition to the ultimate, theological extreme; he is the declared antagonist of the Original Patriarch.

On the other hand, those who believe that Christianity, as the word itself implies, is founded primarily on Jesus Christ, the Son, rather than on the Father, easily discover when they look for the image of Jesus in Blake's writings that the English visionary poet is entirely—indeed radically—Christian.

There is a real, obstinate puzzle here. Even if we allow that Christians, so to speak, begin from Christ, they certainly proceed swiftly to embrace the Father and the Holy Spirit; the doctrine of the Trinity, with its simultaneous assertion of distinctness and profound, underlying unity, is central to Christianity. If the Father and the Son are one substance, it follows that they are on the same side (see eye to eye, perceive the same moral truth). But in Blake the Father and the Son are not on the same side. It was Jehovah, we saw, who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. One of the most brilliant things Blake ever wrote is his meticulous demonstration that Christ broke every one of the ten:

> Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree; now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbaths God? murder those who were murdered because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labor of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate? covet when he prayed for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules. (MHH, Plate 23, lines 272–83, E, p. 43)

Blake wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in his thirties. But one knows that he was pleased with the passage—and can

perhaps infer that it represents a constant in his intractably Protean thought—from the fact that he provided a fuller version of the same argument in a work he wrote in his early sixties, *The Everlasting Gospel*.

Of course Blake is a witty and perhaps also an evasive writer. The attempt to show that Jesus broke the prohibition of covetousness, for example, is a complete failure. But the other arguments stick, apply some kind of purchase. The charge that Jesus stole the labour of others has an oddly Marxian ring to it, but the rhetorically intended implication—that any sane person can see at once that he was right to do so—is far from Marxian. It might be supposed that the poetic rhetoric works through a subversion of the very idea of rational demonstration, through a technique of consciously obtruded sophistry: 'If reason tells you that Christ stole, then reason, not Christ, stands condemned!' But it is simply not true that the arguments advanced by Blake himself are merely flimsy, self-destroying structures; they themselves have a powerfully rational form. Above all, it is the existence, at the back of our minds, of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity which gives real strength to the argument. The accusation of murder would indeed have all the frailty of hyperbole if it were made against most of the human prophets whose followers died for their cause. But, if Jesus was God, he knew; he caused; he bears the full burden. As an *ad hominem* argument addressed to the ordinary Christian, it cuts deeply.

More plausible is the suggestion that the whole passage is not irrationalist, but rather (by implication) ethically contextualist. Blake is concerned to show that specific moral injunctions are always vulnerable to a wholly ethical subversion. We may suppose for a moment that murder is always and absolutely wicked, but real life with its indefinite chains of causation may supply instances to the contrary: if Jane killed the SS guard knowing that, had she not done so, a hundred children would have died, and by so acting did indeed save them, is it now still clear that Jane acted wickedly? In such cases, it might be said, there is an unavoidable implication that the wider context always has the power, potentially, to cancel the predictions of the too-confident ethical atomist. The reasoning is fair, but I am not sure that it represents Blake's most urgent thought.

Where we post-Utilitarians think of a felicific contextual field to be gradually investigated and assessed, he thinks rather of an immediate intuition of a supra-legal goodness.

The most difficult proposition in the series offered by Blake is the first. He undertakes to show that Jesus did not obey the first commandment, which is to honour God. Blake says that Jesus mocked the Sabbath and so mocked the Sabbath's God. This, it will be said, must either be deliberate false reasoning, directed precisely at the letter rather than the spirit of divine worship, or else Blake is saying seriously that Jesus really did reject the false God of Jewish ritual. The second interpretation is the more likely to be right and is, moreover, less innocently conventional than it might appear. If the God of the Jewish sabbatarian is also the God of the orthodox Christian, Blake's observation is potentially explosive. Certainly he was capable of thinking that not just the God of the Pharisees but the God who made the world is wicked. There is a grammatically mangled but nevertheless perfectly lucid entry in his notebook for 1810 ('Additions to Blake's Catalogue of Pictures &c'): 'Thinking as I do that this Creator of this World is a very Cruel Being and being a Worshipper of Christ I cannot help saying the Son O how unlike the Father . . .' (*A Vision of the Last Judgement*, E, p. 565). In orthodox Christianity the Trinity is a happy family, in Blake, unhappy; the Father and the Son do not get on.

If, anachronistically, we were to show our puzzle to St Augustine, he would answer without hesitation, 'Blake is a heretical Christian; his heresy is Gnostic'. The idea that the power which made the world is wicked, not good, is the central proposition of Gnosticism. The word, 'Gnosticism' is derived from the Greek *gnosis*, which means 'knowledge'. Paul A. Cantor has remarked that Gnostics loved to travel backwards in pre-history.[3] They noticed that the only way to add to a revealed text giving an account of the creation was to work on the beginning, to add preliminaries to the creation itself, a pre-genetic theology. Within Gnosticism the creator of this dreadful world is called the Demiurge, 'the workman'. The word is Plato's, but the Demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus* is not

3 Ibid., p. 11.

especially evil but is just a decent workman doing his best with imperfect materials,[4] producing at last a beautiful cosmos (41A, 42E, 68E, 69C). Somewhere beyond the depraved, depraving Gnostic Demiurge stands the true divinity; Christ can teach us to shed our involvement in the corruption which lies all around us and conduct us to knowledge of the divine reality.

This movement, while it may have roots in pre-Christian thought, became prominent in the second century AD, when it suddenly began to look dangerous. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, who lived from about AD 130 to 200), Hippolytus (from about AD 170 to 236) and Tertullian (from about AD 160 to 225) all attacked Gnosticism,[5] as Augustine was to do two hundred years later. Until 1945 our knowledge of Gnosticism was largely derived from these hostile accounts. In that year, however, an astonishing discovery was made near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt:[6] a large collection of Coptic texts, comprising forty treatises of which only two had been known before. The copies found appear to be no earlier than the fourth century AD, but many of the works, including the amazing Apocryphon of John or The Secret Book according to John (which we had previously known only from a summary in Irenaeus) were clearly composed centuries before.

We are looking at the historically defeated party. The matter is of some interest because in one respect orthodox Christianity seems philosophically more vulnerable than Gnosticism. Christians hold that God who made the world is both all-powerful and all-good, but that the world he made is full of pain and corruption. This is commonly referred to as 'the problem of evil' but the matter may really be simpler than that. We have here not a problem but a solution: what is presented

4 See W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962–78), vol. v, p. 254.

5 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, esp. I. xxx, in Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, ed. Adelin Rousseau *et al.*, 5 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969–79), vol. i, pp. 364–86; Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* (*Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*), Book V, attributed to Origen in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia* (*Series Graeca*), 161 vols. (Paris: 1857–66), vol. xvi (iii), pp. 3124–205; Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), *passim*.

6 For a good account of the Nag Hammadi find, see G. Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 1–19.

as a complex difficulty is in fact as clear a refutation of Christianity as anyone could desire.

The argument exists in a pre-Christian form. It was stated by the robustly anti-religious Epicurus (342–270 BC):

> God . . . either works to take away evils, and is unable; or he is able, and is unwilling; or he is neither willing nor able, or he is both willing and able. If he is willing and is unable, he is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if he is able and unwilling, he is envious [*invidus*], which is equally at variance with God; if he is neither willing nor able, he is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if he is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does he not remove them?[7]

We have this passage only because it is quoted for us by the Christian author Lactantius. For Lactantius the answer is easy: God could remove the evils but chooses not to; it does not follow that he is envious; rather, he is concerned that man should learn wisdom: we could not recognize good if we had not first recognized evil. It is an answer which has recurred through the centuries (we shall find something very like it in Milton), but it satisfies few. A child may die in pain in a remote place where no one is aware of the suffering and so no one learns from it. Even when the pain is usefully visible, is it really necessary that the demonstration be conducted over and over again? It is one kind of scientist who, with gritted teeth, performs a single, necessary, painful experiment; it is another who repeats the same experiment, 'for teaching purposes', again and again, long after the audience has grasped the point. The argument which derives all evil from the free will of the creature, similarly, breaks at once upon the pain of children. One is left with a contradiction: the Creator is irreconcilable with his creation.

Philo Judaeus (about 20 BC to about AD 50), the Jewish exegete, famously asked how it is, if God is perfection and matter, created by him, subject to decay, that God can have anything to do with the cosmos.[8] *Quid Athenae Hierosolymis*?

7 See Lactantius, *Treatise on the Anger of God*, ch. xiii, in *The Works of Lactantius*, 2 vols., trans. William Fletcher (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), vol. ii, p. 28.

8 See Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p.25.

('What is Athens to Jerusalem?') said Tertullian, to disparage the unbaptized wisdom of the Greeks. *Quid Deus mundo*? 'What has God to do with this world?' Philo asks, more trenchantly perhaps. It is curious that Epicurus, from whom we began, believed very precisely in a divine order which took no interest at all in human affairs. But the Gnostics, at this level of their scheme, have no problem of evil. If the Creator is himself corrupt there is nothing puzzling in the fact that we see corruption everywhere. Gnosticism is often thought of as a wildly mystical, affair but in this fundamental respect it is oddly realistic. In the old phrase of Proclus and Simplicius it 'saves the appearances',[9] that is, it fits the facts. But Christianity won.

It will be evident from the summary I have given, according to which Christ seeks to rescue us, through *gnosis* or knowledge, from the phantasmal corruption of the Demiurge, that we have here an opposition between Jesus and the Creator and therefore that the groundwork of an analogy between the thought of Blake and that of the early Gnostics is already in place. The analogy seems to grow stronger if we look at a certain sub-group, within Gnosticism, known as the Ophites (from the Greek *ophis*, 'serpent'). John Lawrence Mosheim's great ecclesiastical history was translated into English in the eighteenth century and may, just possibly, have been read by Blake. Mosheim described the Ophites as believing that 'the *serpent* by which our first parents were deceived, was either CHRIST himself or *sophia* [wisdom], concealed under the form of that animal.'[10]

The underlying form of this sub-heresy is tolerably clear. The Gnostics revere knowledge. In Genesis Jehovah forbids Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge; therefore Jehovah is wicked. Notice how this joins seamlessly to the prior Gnostic idea that Jehovah, often called Ialdabaoth in Gnostic writings, is already wicked, in any case, as the creator of this world. The

9 Proclus (5th cent. AD), *Hypotyposis astronomicorum positionum*, v. 10, ed. C. Manitius (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909), p. 140; Simplicius, *De Caelo*, ii. 12, 13, iii. 1, 7, in *Simplicii in Aristotelis De Caelo Commentaria*, ed. I. L. Heiberg (Berlin, 1894), pp. 509, 510, 516, 519, 565, 641. See also G. E. R. Lloyd, 'Saving the Appearances', *Classical Quarterly*, NS 28 (1978), pp. 202–22.

10 *An Ecclesiastical History Antient and Modern from the Birth of Christ to the Beginning of the Present Century*, trans. Archibald Maclaine, 5 vols. (London: printed for A. Millar, 1758–68), vol. i, p. 190.

serpent, on the other hand, who in defiance of the tyrant conducts Adam and Eve to *gnosis*, is clearly good. Augustine is even more positive than Mosheim on the identification, in Ophism, of the serpent with Christ: *Ophitae a colubro nominati sunt: coluber enim Graece ophis dicitur. Hunc autem Christum arbitrantur* ('The Ophites are named after the serpent: for in Greek a serpent is *ophis*. This serpent they deem to be Christ').[11]

Tertullian's account, however, differentiates the serpent from Christ: *Nam serpentem magnificant in tantum, ut illum etiam Christo praeferant, 'Ipse enim', inquiunt, 'scientiae nobis boni et mali originem dedit'* ('For they magnify the serpent to such a degree that they even place him before Christ. "For it was the serpent", they say, "who gave us the origin of the knowledge of good and evil" '). Notice, however, that there is here no implication that, since the serpent is not to be identified with Christ, he is once more an agent of evil. On the contrary, it is Christ who suffers by the comparison. The serpent leads us to *gnosis* and is therefore good.

The narrative of Genesis is starkly set out, but it was enigmatic from the beginning. At 2: 9 we are told that there were two trees in Eden, the tree of life in the very centre of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God tells man that he is free to eat from any tree except the tree of knowledge (2: 17). It is a story which becomes more puzzling the more it is thought about. At the hands of Gnostic interpreters the tangled skein may shake free in various mythic versions.

The non-Ophitic Apocryphon of John is of great importance here. This work may date from about AD 180. As R. M. Grant has pointed out,[12] it makes a strong distinction between the two trees: the tree of life, the work of the evil Creator, is itself evil and the tree of knowledge is good. The meaning of the tree of life in orthodox theology remains oddly unclear. Augustine

[11] *De Haeresibus*, I. xvii, in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xlii, p. 28; in *Corpus Christianorum* (*Series Latina*) (1954–), vol. xlvi, *Sancti Aureli Augustini Opera* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1969), p. 297.

[12] *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961) pp. 79 ff.

thought that if Adam had eaten from this tree he would have acquired immortality.[13] Others thought its virtue was entirely natural.[14] In the Apocryphon the saviour explains to man that the tree of life is evil and continues,

> But as for that tree which is called by them the tree of acquaintance with good and evil [the tree of knowledge], and which is the afterthought [*epinoia*] of the light, they remained in its presence lest he gaze upon his fulfillment and recognize the nakedness of his shame. But I rectified them so that they ate.
>
> And I said to the savior, Sir, was it not the snake that taught Adam and Eve to eat?
>
> The savior laughed and said, the snake taught them to consume imperfection consisting of the sowing of desire for corruption, so that he (Adam) might become useful to it. And it knew that he was disobedient to it because of the light of the afterthought [*epinoia*] dwelling within him and making him more upright in his thinking than the first ruler ['first archon']. And it wanted to extract from Adam the power that it had imparted to him.[15]

I have given Bentley Layton's version. The passage is certainly not uniformly clear throughout. Layton himself notes that, where he gives 'they remained in its presence', there is a variant reading in the manuscripts: 'they gave the command not to taste of it, i.e. not to hearken to it, for the commandment was directed against him'.[16] The immediate difficulty is the reference of the pronoun 'they' (throughout the passage, as we shall see, the pronouns give trouble). If we take 'they' to refer to the power under the control of the first archon, Ialdabaoth,[17] then the alternative reading makes good Gnostic sense: the jealous creator of this world, 'Jahweh', the 'simple artificer, uncouth and ignorant',[18] forbids Adam to eat of the

[13] *De Civitate Dei*, xiii. 20 and xiv. 26, in *The City of God against the Pagans*, Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols.: vol. i trans. George E. McCracken, vols. ii–vii trans. William M. Green (London: Heinemann, 1957–72), vol. iv, pp. 214 and 394.

[14] See e.g. Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *Elévations sur les mystères*, in *Œuvres de Bossuet*, ed. Nicholas Philibert *et al.*, 43 vols. (Versailles: J. A. Lebel, 1815–19), vol. viii, p. 129.

[15] Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (London: SCM Press, 1987), pp. 45–6.

[16] Ibid., p. 45.

[17] The identification of the first archon with Ialdabaoth is made clear earlier in the *Apocryphon*; in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 35–6.

[18] Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 78.

tree of knowledge, from fear and resentment. That Ialdabaoth may indeed be taken as a Gnostic Jahweh or Jehovah is made clear later in the Apocryphon when Christ explains that Ialdabaoth is the God of the Old Testament, expelling Adam and Eve from the garden, sending the flood to punish mankind.[19] The phrase, 'they remained in its presence', is more puzzling. Could it mean, 'they remained close to the tree, to guard it'? Frederick Wisse, in his translation, gives, 'they stayed in front of it'.[20]

Those who cannot read the original Coptic (and I am one of them) will hardly be reassured if they look at other available translations of this passage. I take it that, in Bentley Layton's sentence beginning, 'It knew that . . .', 'it' refers to the serpent and that the 'he', following is Adam; this gives the meaning 'And the serpent knew that Adam was disobedient to it, because of the *epinoia* within Adam, making Adam more upright in his thinking than the first archon'. In Frederick Wisse's translation Adam's disobedience is not disobedience to the serpent, but to the first archon.[21] This difference between the versions immediately shrinks in importance, however, if we consider the serpent not as the enemy of the Creator, as he is in Ophitic Gnosticism but, as an ally or even a form of Ialdabaoth. Ialdabaoth is actually described as serpentine in the tenth section of the Apocryphon.[22] In Howard N. Bream's translation,[23] and in R. M. Grant's,[24] it is Eve not Adam who is disobedient (despite, as Bream saw, the fact that Eve has not been created at this stage in the story).

We are faced with considerable mythic variation but the material before us is not merely chaotic. The ineluctable Gnostic allegiance to the tree of knowledge persists in all versions. He who shows the way to the tree of knowledge is good. He who forbids eating from the tree of knowledge is wicked. If the snake is bad, as in the Apocryphon of John, he

19 In Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 46 and 49.

20 In *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, translated by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project, gen. ed. J. M. Robinson, 3rd edn. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), p. 117.

21 Ibid., p. 111.

22 In Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 35.

23 *The Apocryphon of John and Other Coptic Translations* (Baltimore, Md.: Halgo, 1987), pp. 29–30.

24 *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings*, pp. 45–6.

must be detached from his role of leading Adam and Eve to *gnosis*. That role belongs to Christ. If the serpent really did this, then the serpent and Christ are one. Ophism, as presented by Augustine, with its identification of Christ with the snake, becomes, so to speak, a *predictable* variant of the Gnostic myth of the Apocryphon.

It is true that we find in Origen (about AD 185 to about 254) the claim that the Ophites, far from approving of Christ, in fact refused to admit to their assembly anyone who had not cursed Christ.[25] J. M. Evans thought that the cursing may have taken the form of the accusation that Christ persuaded Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of knowledge.[26] If this guess is right, Origen, it seems, was badly adrift. What he perceived as a curse would have been offered as praise by the proponents of the heresy. Indeed, if one considers the observation of Origen in its context, the web of likely misunderstanding grows intricate. Origen was arguing against Celsus, a pluralist pagan who saw Christianity as a cranky, secretive religion. The error of Celsus—and in a way it is the opposite of the error of Origen and a good deal worse—is to see the Ophites not just as Christians but as typical Christians; this 'Gnosticizing' view enables him to infer that *for Christians* the Creator is 'an accursed God'.[27]

Epiphanius, a century and a half after Origen, wrote his *Panarion* (the word means 'bread-basket': Greek borrowing from Latin), an almost frenzied attack on heretics, including the Ophites. Yet he is clearly shaken by the fact that the serpent led Adam and Eve to knowledge; he argues, strenuously, that they were punished not for acquiring knowledge but for disobeying.[28] The Gnostic in one itches to answer, 'But was it not tyrannical to require obedience on *this* precise point?' Epiphanius, unlike Origen but like Augustine, is clear that the Ophites exalt the serpent by identifying him with Christ.[29]

[25] *Contra Celsum*, vi. 28, in Henry Chadwick's translation with introduction and notes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 344.

[26] *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 66.

[27] *Contra Celsum*, vi. 28, trans. Chadwick's, p. 343.

[28] *Panarion*, xxxviii, in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Book I, sections 1–4, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), p. 242.

[29] *Panarion*, xxxviii, trans. Williams, pp. 241, 242.

Even if there is some 'mythic wobble' in the early texts Hans Jonas is able to show that by the time of Mani (third century AD) 'the Gnostic interpretation of the Paradise story and Jesus's connection with it had become so firmly established that he could simply put Jesus in place of the serpent with no mention of the latter'.[30]

The tendency of my argument is to suggest that, long before William Blake, Gnosticism implies an alternative Trinity in which the Son opposes the Father. Those learned in Gnosticism will be eager to point out that Gnosticism has in fact a developed trinitarian conception of the divine nature which is directly opposed to the picture I have been drawing out. Hippolytus's account of the sect of Gnostics known as the Peratae, an Ophitic group said to have been founded by one Euphrates, describes them as believing in a triple universe: first, an originating paternal power, second, an infinite number of ancillary powers and, third, *gegenemenōn*, 'created things'.[31] Hippolytus also says, in the same passage, that the first of these divisions, the original power, is itself a trinity; within the primary divine sphere of 'pleromatic' perfection we discover a triadic structure. This divine triad is variously expounded. *Nous*, 'intelligence', is separated from the Father and identified as the Son. This Son, far from being morally superior to the Father figure, is seen, somewhat as Christ is seen in Arian theology, as a secondary entity: 'though coeval with the light that is before him . . . not equal to it in power'.[32]

Here, it might be said, is the real trinitarian doctrine of Gnosticism. One must acknowledge that Gnostics pretty consistently maintained that a true, genuinely admirable deity existed on the far side of the universe. If this deity is thought of as 'the Father', my tensely oppositional 'alternative Trinity' simply falls to the ground. If, however, the Father is identified with Jehovah—and, culturally, this became more and more the

[30] *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 94.

[31] *Philosophumena*, V. xii. 1, attributed to Origen in Migne, *Patrologia* (*Series Graeca*), vol. xvi (iii), p. 3162.

[32] *Berolensis* [or *Berlin*] *Gnostic Codex* 8502, xci, 14, in *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolensis 8502*, ed. and trans. into German by W. C. Till (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1955), p. 223.

dominant idea—then, unavoidably, the antagonism of Father and Son will become vividly apparent. According to Irenaeus, the Gnostic Saturninus said that 'Christ came to destroy the God of the Jews'.[33]

It is a strange experience to reread Genesis after immersing oneself in Gnostic material. Our own culture may be secular, but its habits of reading and interpreting texts, especially ancient texts, are moulded by Christian orthodoxy. Neutrality is perhaps not possible for anyone. Yet certain features of the story which seem meaningless or otiose in the orthodox reading make sense in the Gnostic. Could Genesis itself have been, at one stage in its formation, a Gnostic or 'proto-Gnostic' text? It is a little like asking whether *Paradise Lost* itself might really have been, at some stage in its formation, the Satanist work Blake made of it—a proposition which is self-evidently absurd to many, but not to me.

We are never told in Genesis that the serpent is Satan; all that comes from a later tradition. We are told, on the other hand, at the beginning of Genesis 3, that the serpent was the subtlest of all the creatures. Claus Westermann says that the Hebrew word translated as 'subtle' in the Authorized Version connotes cleverness or astuteness as well as guile.[34] The serpent asks Eve the question we have all been asking ever since, 'Why does God not allow you to eat from *all* the trees?' Eve answers witlessly by repeating the mere fact of prohibition: God forbade them to eat of the tree of knowledge, but then she adds further words, the words of God himself, 'lest ye die' (3: 3). It is a reason of sorts and it accords with God's speech earlier at 2: 17, but it is almost as if the reason for obedience and the penalty for disobedience are crushingly identified. We seek a moral explanation and instead receive the answer, 'Because I'll hit you if you don't'. This, it will be noticed, already fits the tyrannical Creator of Gnosticism slightly more easily than it fits the loving God of orthodoxy.

It is possible, admittedly, to square the reason given with pure benevolence on God's part if we simply assume that the

33 *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxiv. 2, ed. Rousseau, vol. i, pp. 322–4.

34 *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 239.

tree is somehow dangerous in itself; God has warned them to stay away from it as a mother warns her child to stay away from fire—because it is likely to hurt Adam and Eve in ways which God himself would not wish. When they do eat of the tree, however, God indeed punishes them and the punishment can be construed as a promise of death: '. . . and unto dust shalt thou return' (3: 19). The presumption that the reason *is* the punishment seems to arise very naturally. Christian orthodoxy, evidently, has not succeeded in avoiding it. Certainly Eve's reply to the serpent fails to allay our moral doubts.

The subtle serpent, as if dissatisfied with Eve's answer, provides a much fuller answer of his own: 'Ye shall not surely die. For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil.' Thus the Revised Version. The Authorized Version gives 'as gods' instead of 'as God'. God had to stop them, the serpent suggests, because he knew that if they ate of the tree of knowledge they would become divine, like himself. Walther Zimmerli says bluntly, 'God's jealousy is the reason for the command'.[35] Here, before any commentator, Hebrew, Persian, Greek, or Coptic has said a word, the bare text smells of Gnosticism. Of course Eve says later that the serpent *beguiled* her (3: 13) and one may read in the word a measured condemnation of any 'proto-Gnosticism' we might have supposed to be present in the words of the (now disqualified) serpent. Nevertheless the serpent himself, it would seem, is already, in Genesis, a Gnostic. Even if these thoughts are cancelled, they are evidently *capable of being thought*, in the ninth century BC.

Moreover one may question the completeness of the cancellation. Certain elements of the serpent's version 'spill over', as it were, into the main story. Most notable of these is the fact that the tree is called by everyone 'the tree of *knowledge*'. God himself tells us that this is its name. The serpent said that if they ate from the tree their eyes would be opened; at 3: 7, after the eating of the apple, we read, 'And the eyes of them both were opened'. The serpent said they would be 'as God [gods],

35 'Gottes Missgunst hat das Gebot gegeben': *1, Mose, 1–11, Die Urgeschichte, Zürcher Bibelkommentare* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1967), p. 155.

knowing good and evil' and at 3: 22 God says, 'Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil'.

The effect, certainly, is intermittent at best. If we read as our ancestors did, we must make the 'priestly narrative' of primal creation (1: 1 to 2: 4) continuous with the much older 'Yahwist narrative' of man's origin (2: 5 ff.). To do so is to have planted strongly in one's mind, at the outset, the anti-Gnostic idea that God made a good, not a corrupt, world. Harold Bloom perhaps forgot the words 'the serpent beguiled me' when he wrote that 'we have no reason to believe the serpent malevolent'.[36] It might be pointed out that the serpent errs, un-gnostically, when he predicts that Adam and Eve will not die if they eat the apple (3: 4). Indeed, if 'die' means 'become subject, in due course, to mortality', and if we were right earlier to see Jehovah's 'Unto dust shalt thou return' as mirroring the threat or warning originally announced by Jehovah, then the serpent is wrong. A more literal-minded reader, however, reading this text could easily assume that God's words meant that Adam and Eve would die at once, on eating the fruit. On this reading God proves wrong and the serpent right (exactly as he was right when he predicted that their eyes would be opened).[37] In Tyndale's Pentateuch of 1530 (fo. iv) this sense is stronger still, because of the translator's intrusion of the marvellous word, 'Tush', meaning roughly, 'What a load of nonsense!': 'Tush ye shall not dye'.

An investigation of the original context of Genesis, in Babylonian, Sumerian, and other myths, will not enable us to decide for or against a Gnostic reading of Genesis itself, though it may have the negative effect of—precisely—teaching us not to decide, may strengthen our sense that the settled ethical scheme of later theology was not in place when the Jahwist composed his account. When we read in Robert Davidson's level-headed and orthodox commentary on Genesis 1–11 that, first, the serpent's view is that the Creator is jealous and, second, that the notion of a jealous creator was 'a widespread idea in the ancient world',[38] it may seem that among the many

[36] *The Book of J*, trans. from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg, interpreted by Harold Bloom (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 149.

[37] See R. W. L. Moberley, 'Did the Serpent get it Right?', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 39 (1988), pp. 1–26, esp. pp. 7–8.

[38] *Genesis 1–11* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 40.

voices of Genesis a proto-Gnostic voice can be heard. On the other hand, if early Jewish religion resembled pre-Euripidean Greek religion in not *expecting* the divine power to be good (but only powerful) then the jealousy of Jehovah need carry no charge of Gnostic shock or scandal.

It is one thing to say that the serpent was seen in such and such a way by later Gnostics and another to say that the serpent, within the text of Genesis, is Gnostic. I am certain of nothing except the propriety of uncertainty. The notion that such a characterization is *self-evidently* absurd has gone for ever. To those who are shocked by such a proposition I offer a thought more shocking still. Was Jesus a Gnostic? Note that I am not saying, 'Was there a positive interpretation of the figure of Jesus in later Gnosticism?' (that is unquestionably true), but 'Is the Jesus who appears in the Gospels himself a Gnostic?'

Giovanni Filoramo, when he considers the question of the rise of Gnosticism, rejects—with less than complete confidence—the hypothesis that the movement developed within Judaism, in times of political crisis when anti-rabbinical feeling ran high. Gnosticism took shape, he decides, 'in an atmosphere of violent total rejection of Judaism, a characteristic of certain anti-Jewish Christian circles rather than of any Jewish group known to us'.[39] Did these Christians invent a Christ to serve their turn or were there pre-existing elements in the teaching of Jesus which were grist to their mill? The Jesus of the Gospels is opposed to the Pharisees, the priests, and the law. If Paul is to be believed, he placed something not terribly Jewish called 'the spirit' before the Law (Romans 7: 6; 2 Corinthians 3: 6). In Matthew's Gospel Jesus looks forward with a certain relish to the destruction of the created world: 'Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken' (24: 29). Observe that not only earth but the powers of heaven will tremble. There is an affinity of tone here with the admittedly more violent language of the Gnostic Gospel according to Thomas: 'I have cast fire upon the world,

[39] *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 146.

and see, I am watching over it until it blazes'.[40] But the crucial factor for my case, the hostility of the Son to the Father, is not so much missing as expressly contradicted by the New Testament narratives.

Indeed it is John who lays down the basis of the orthodox Christian harmonious Trinity when he affirms, at the beginning of his Gospel, the full divinity of Christ. One has only to check Jesus's use of the phrase 'my father' in a concordance to become aware of a mysterious intimacy which is the opposite of hostility. Yet there is room within this intimacy or identity, it would seem, for disagreement. The commandments of Jesus, love God and love your neighbour (Mark 12: 29–31) are two in number. The Father had given ten. But Jesus says, 'There is none other commandment greater than these'. Imagine, if you will, the Father listening to these words. The first of Jesus's commandments indeed accords with the first given by Jehovah to Moses. But the second proposes, in effect, a wholescale revision, a transcending simplification. Is it merely silly to sense in these words an implicit lack of enthusiasm for, say, 'Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy', whether in the version offered at Exodus 20: 10–11 (where the reason for the command is simply the fact that Jehovah rested after the work of creation) or in the version offered at Deuteronomy 5: 12–14 (where the emphasis shifts to human needs)? If Christ's teaching is in any degree not complementary to the Old Law but subversive of it, then there is a potential schizophrenia in the triune God, a schism not among the underlings but, so to speak, at headquarters. It will be noticed that I am only saying with pusillanimous caution what Blake said with brave clarity in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in the passage from which we began. Orthodox trinitarians have never known why Christ, if he was God, could cry on the cross. 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matthew 27: 46).

I will answer my own question. Jesus was not a Gnostic. But one can see why the Gnostics thought they recognized in him an ally, not a foe.

[40] See Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 382.

So far I have deliberately stretched the thread of my disquisition between Blake and the Ophites of the second century AD. Some readers will be conscious already of the strenuous suppression of the one intervening figure who clamours for attention, John Milton. We shall come to Milton soon, but first we need to look at a strange tragedy by the Elizabethan Christopher Marlowe.

II

Raising the Devil: Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*

(1) Calvinists and Hermetists

In the 1950s when, as someone said, you could still 'taste the apple' of post-war growing prosperity, teachers and students of English literature conspired to see the past as even more rosily unified than their own time. The world we had lost was hierarchical, organic, irradiated by a common belief in a loving God. This world-picture stood in implicit contrast with, on the one hand, the value-free quantified universe of natural science and, on the other, the subjectivist *angoisse* of Romanticism. We are brought back to the brisk certainty of C. S. Lewis. It was absurd, he suggested, to suppose that anyone in Milton's century could have begun to think, as Blake and Shelley thought, that Satan in *Paradise Lost* was morally superior to God the Father. In some ways the severer New Historicists have returned to this approach. A poem is not 'for all time' but, on the contrary, its meaning is determined and limited by its historical context; the hegemonic structures of society produced the literature of power and suppression. It will be noticed that, while the analysis is similar to that offered by Old Historicism, the values differ: Lewis loved hierarchy; the New Historicist is profoundly shocked by it (hence Graham Bradshaw's shrewd description of the movement as Tillyardism 'on its head'[1]).

Real historians meanwhile could not help knowing that the period was rent by theological conflict, shaken with economic instability. Homilies of obedience were read in churches not because everyone was joyously obedient but because many were not. Calvinists and Roman Catholics did not, to put it

[1] *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), p. 10; cf. p. 151.

mildly, agree harmoniously. Protestant fought with Protestant. Some (we now know) did not believe in God at all. Indeed the age was capable of a degree of blasphemy which can shock modern unbelievers.

Yet Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, the story of the magician who sold his soul to the Devil for knowledge and power, looks at first sight like *the* text for the Old Historicist. Much of the drama of the period is nervous about theology, too conscious of its own secular frivolity to engage with the deepest elements in the Christian world-view; but Marlowe's play is frankly—thunderously—theological. Indeed, it might be said, it would be hard to imagine a clearer case of a theocratic drama than this, in which the hero is taught the folly and wickedness of his presumption by being cast at the end into the fire of hell.[2] In fact this unitary account of the play really will not do.

We may begin, in an elementary fashion, with the title. In both the 1604 and 1616 editions the work is called a 'tragical history'. This, we may say, is a warning shot fired across the bows of the Historicist. It signals, 'Not a morality, but this new, exciting thing, a tragedy'. In a rough and ready way it is fair to say that tragedy is distinguished from the older morality-drama in having moral ambiguity at its centre. Hegel, thinking indeed about Greeks rather than English Elizabethans, said that we had tragedy not when right conflicted with wrong but when right conflicted with right,[3] that is, when we have a disunified ethical field. Dante's great suffering figures in his *Inferno* 'feel tragic' as long as we are allowed in some degree to admire them—*against* the judgement of God who has placed them in hell. Dante notices the implied blasphemy and unifies his ethical field at *Inferno*, xx. 27, where Dante, the pilgrim within the poem, is rebuked by his guide for his feelings of pity. Here tragedy is repressed.

To argue in this way, however, may be to commit the error

[2] Leo Kirschbaum saw the play as a closed system of orthodoxy: setting aside the reports of Marlowe's atheism with robust New Critical confidence, he wrote, 'There is no more obvious Christian drama in all literature than *Dr Faustus*': 'Marlowe's Faustus 'A Reconsideration', *Review of English Studies*, 19 (1943), pp. 225–41, at p. 229.

[3] *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, I. iii. 3, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. i, p. 221.

of generic essentialism, to assume that there is some one thing called 'tragedy', rather than a phylogenetic tree of texts, ramifying and changing in time. Certainly I am suggesting that the notion of a fall which is not simply deserved but is also terrible is, if not ubiquitous, interestingly recurrent in the plays we call 'tragedies'. We find it in Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Racine. Equally certainly, the factors which produce our sense that the fall is terrible change in time. Greek tragedy flourished at a period when people felt that self-assertive behaviour was simultaneously heroic and dangerously impious. *Dr Faustus* was written at a time when people had begun to feel that the acquisition of knowledge could be a kind of heroism, even while they remembered how Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise because they ate from the tree of knowledge. If we find something tragic, that is, something terrible and pitiable in the fall of Faustus, it is immediately implied that we are not seeing him simply as 'a nasty piece of work' who gets what he deserves. It implies, as Dante saw in a parallel context, criticism of the God who damns him.

It may be said that all this is covered by the old phrase said to have been coined by R. M. Dawkins:[4] Faustus is 'a Renaissance man who paid a medieval price'; that is, the narrative judges Faustus as surely and unequivocally as Dante is made to judge the seemingly noble damned. But to take the story in this way is, once more, to construe the narrative itself as morality rather than tragedy. I have no doubt that some in the original audience would have drawn exactly this conclusion. But not all. The word 'tragical' in the title gives an advance authorization to those whose feelings are more complex.

The basic story of *Dr Faustus* is an interesting example of fact turning into myth. It began with a real historical figure but as it became art it was read back into, imitated by nature. We may think of the purportedly factual account of poor Ashbourner, the scholar of St John's College, Cambridge, who, finding his brain overtaxed by his book, was visited by the Devil, dressed as a Master of Arts. The learned visitor expounded the difficult passage and said he would take

4 I am told this is by Mr Michael Jamieson.

Ashbourner to the University of Padua, and make him a Doctor of Divinity. Two days afterwards Ashbourner's gown was found floating in the Cam.[5] There is no specific allusion to Marlowe's play, but the story, with its special interest in academic anxiety and academic power, is the story of *Dr Faustus*.

Meanwhile in one respect the Dawkins's catchphrase is misleading. '*Medieval* price' suggests that the damnation element would have 'felt antiquated' alongside Renaissance excitement over extending the boundaries of knowledge. In fact the damnation element is as 'trendy' as the Renaissance element. This 'happy by-gone time' of unity was marked by the simultaneous rise of two contradictory pictures of human nature: from magicians, Platonists, and Hermetists came the idea that human potential was limitless: man could ascend into the firmament of knowledge and become divine; from Calvin and the Reformers came the contrary idea that human capacity was zero: man is totally depraved, naturally damned, deprived of all initiative, whether for moral or intellectual good. Those who escape hell are saved not by merit but by the inscrutable Grace of God. Others—many others—are predestined to eternal damnation. Each of these ideas is moving rapidly in the late sixteenth century. Each is on a collision course with the other. What better place for their encounter than the stage of the Rose Theatre?

Calvin notoriously denied human free will through his doctrine of predestination. At the same time he retained the notion that man, for all that he could do nothing but sin, was nevertheless responsible for that sin and justly damnable. The Platonico-Hermetical party of the other hand ascribed to man not just free will but also a kind of super-freedom, a liberty to determine one's own nature: a doctrine which curiously anticipates twentieth-century Existentialism. Pico della Mirandola in a famous passage describes how God created the world, producing first something like 'the Elizabethan world-picture' beloved of E. M. W. Tillyard, in which everything had its

5 *A Letter from Cambridge in A Strange and True Relation of a Young Woman possessed with the Devill* (1647), cited in Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 564.

proper place in a harmonious hierarchy. But in Pico the story does not end here, for man is still to be made:

> All was now complete; all things had been assigned to the highest, the middle and the lowest orders. But in its final creation it was not the part of the Father's power to fail as though exhausted . . . He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: 'Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgement thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form and what functions thou thyself shall desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand we have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature . . . thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgement, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine'.[6]

The Hermetists were followers of Hermes Trismegistus, that is, 'Hermes Thrice-Greatest'. The teachings of Hermes (not Gnostic but touched, at times, by Gnosticism) are embodied in the collection of religious and philosophical writings known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. These were shown to be post-Christian in 1614 (they are now generally thought to date from the middle of the first to the end of the third century AD) but Ficino and other major figures of the Renaissance believed, as Lactantius had believed, that the *Corpus Hermeticum* represented a *prisca theologia*, a primal theology handed down from immemorial antiquity. The reputation of Hermes as a sage waned only gradually after the revelation of 1614.[7]

Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* begins with the glittering image of Icarus who flew up towards the sun. Thereafter images of flight and ascent, mingled with images of rapid travel over the surface of the globe, recur with extraordinary power in the play. At the beginning of Act III Wagner says,

[6] 'Oration on the Dignity of Man', in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Selections in Translation*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 224–5.

[7] See Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1st pub. 1964; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), pp. 398–455.

> Learned Faustus,
> To know the secrets of astronomy
> Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament,
> Did mount him up to scale Olympus' top,
> Where sitting in a chariot burning bright,
> Drawn by the strength of yoked dragons' necks,
> He views the clouds, the planets and the stars,
> The tropics, zones, and quarters of the sky,
> From the bright circle of the horned moon
> Even to the height of *primum mobile*;
> And whirling round with this circumference
> Within the concave compass of the pole,
> From east to west his dragons swiftly glide,
> And in eight days did bring him home again.[8]

We catch already the strange Marlovian marrying of stupendous space and distance with an intuition of triviality, almost of littleness. It is all too easy. Part of this feeling may stem from a perceived analogy with the effortless, seven-league strides of the imagination. Anyone *in thought* can travel in an instant to the moon and back. Compare the following passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

> Command your soul to be in India—and at once, more rapid than your order, it will be there . . . Command it even to fly up to heaven, it will need no wings: nothing can prevent it, neither the sun's fire, nor the aether, nor the turbulence of heaven, nor the other stars—for, cutting across all space, it will ascend in its flight to the furthest body . . . Believe that nothing is impossible for you, think yourself immortal . . . mount above the highest heights.[9]

Here too the reader may be visited by a faint intuition of inner weakness. If thought can do these things, so what? But where Marlowe in a manner welcomes the intuition, incorporates it in the dynamic of his poetry, the Hermetist refuses to allow the potential minimizing effect. For the true Hermetist, however, if intelligence can teach us how to abolish the veil of

[8] B text (1616), III, Chorus, 1–14. This and all subsequent quotations from *Dr Faustus* are taken from *Christopher Marlowe's Dr Faustus*, ed. Michael Keefer (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1991). The A and B texts (1604 and 1616) are given in full in the Revels Plays edition of *Doctor Faustus* by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

[9] *Tractate of Poimandres*, *Corpus Hermeticum*, xi. 19–21, ed. A. D. Nock, trans. A. J. Festugière, 4 vols. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1945–54), vol. i, pp. 154–6.

the physical, can show that what we took for hard reality is really nothing of the sort, these mental powers of flight suddenly became real. Cornelius Agrippa, in a passage to which we shall return, speaks of the mind as 'pure and divine', finding itself able 'to summon winds' and 'raise the dead'. It is hard to be sure whether Agrippa is thinking of the mind's power to imagine these things (such imagining no longer being downgraded in relation to physical things) or whether he has in fact re-entered the physical realm and is claiming positive magical power. He says of man that 'to so much perfection he ascends, that he is made the son of God, and transformed into that image which is God'.[10] Remember the words of the serpent in Genesis, 'Ye shall be as gods' (3: 5). Note also the linking of the notions of humanity and divine sonship, not according to the orthodox theology of incarnation but in the oblique, disturbing manner of the Gnostics. Yet all these Renaissance figures thought of themselves as Christians.

But then there is Calvin:

> Man is so held captive by the yoke of sin that he can of his own nature neither aspire to good through resolve nor struggle after it through effort.[11]

> Whence does it happen that Adam's fall immediately involved so many peoples, together with their infant offspring, in eternal death unless because it so pleased God? . . . It is a dreadful decree, I confess. Yet no one can deny that God foreknew what end man was to have before he created him, and consequently foreknew because he so ordained by his decree.[12]

> The soul, plunged into this deadly abyss, is not only burdened with vices, but is utterly devoid of all good.[13]

Agrippa's man has unbounded freedom to ascend. Calvin's man is totally depraved, predestined to damnation, in bondage to sin, destitute of all freedom.

The tension between these two conceptions of what it is to be human permeates the literature of the later sixteenth

[10] Agrippa, *Opera*, facsimile reprint of 1600 edn., ed. R. H. Popkin, 2 vols., (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1970), vol. i, pp. 321 and 408.

[11] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II. iv. 1, ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1960), vol. i, p. 309.

[12] Ibid. III. xxiii. 7, ed. McNeill and Battles, vol. ii, p. 955.

[13] Ibid. II. iii. 2, ed. McNeill and Battles, vol. i, pp. 291–2.

century, though its presence is not always obvious. Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* is a light-hearted work, an exercise in the genial mode of hyperbolical schoolroom rhetoric, yet the tension is evident even here. Sidney may not be arguing directly, as we used to believe, with Gosson's *School of Abuse*, but he is certainly conscious that he is putting the case for poetry in a world in which, because of Calvinist theology, the human spirit—and perhaps with it all human intellection and imagining—stands condemned as wholly corrupt. He suggests, guardedly but dangerously, that although man may have a fallen will he has still 'an erected wit'.[14] This admits him, suddenly, to the contrary universe of the Platonists and Hermetists and, entirely predictably, we find imagery of heady ascent amid the stars: 'freely ranging in the zodiac of his own wit'.[15]

The signal given by such imagery of flight was clear enough to be picked up in dramatic parody, as in Lyly's *Gallathea*:

> *Astronomer*. I will make the Heavens as plaine to thee as the high waie. Thy cunning shall sitte cheeke by jole with the Sunnes Chariot; then shalt thou see what a base thing it is to have others' thoughts creepe on the grounde, when as thine shall be stitched to the starres.
> *Rafe*. Then I shall be translated from this mortality.
> *Astronomer*. Thy thoughts shall be metamorphosed, and made haile fellowes with the Gods.[16]
>
> (III. iii. 75–83)

For Lyly's audience, the astronomer is funny as Socrates in his *phrontisterion* studying meteorology was funny to the audience of Aristophanes' *Clouds*. But such comedy does not entail real triviality in the object of its satire. Socrates, as we now know, was formidable; so were the magicians and Hermetists. But Calvin, perhaps, was more formidable still.

The defender of unity will want to say, 'But *Dr Faustus* is not a predestinarian Calvinist play; it is, on the contrary, a synthesizing work embodying an older, simpler sense of sin

[14] *The Defence of Poetry*, iii, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 79. [15] Ibid., p. 78.

[16] In *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R. W. Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), vol. ii, p. 453.

punished by damnation; every theatre-goer knows that all the excitement turns on the open question, "Will he or will he not be sent to hell?" For the Calvinist all this is settled in advance; in Calvinism there can be no suspense and, therefore, no drama.'

Taking the last point first, I wish to say that there could certainly be suspense for the Calvinists. They (and there would without doubt have been some in the audience) would be on the edges of their seats waiting to learn whether Faustus would *prove to have been* damned from eternity or not. The *fact* may be settled in advance but our knowledge may be in a state of acute suspense until the end. Instead of 'Will he or will he not repent?' we have 'Can he or can he not repent?'

Certainly, when Faustus cries, 'My heart's so hardened, I cannot repent' (II. iii. 18) he gives the Calvinists in the audience a line which fits their theology very exactly. Calvin himself liked to argue that it is God who hardens the heart of the reprobate, citing Exodus 7: 13, 'And he hardened Pharaoh's heart', and Romans 9: 18, 'Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth'.[17] It is likely that if a medieval person were to watch the final act of *Dr Faustus* he would be puzzled: Faustus clearly repents in the sense that he wishes he had not done what he has done, and he calls on Christ; why then does not Christ respond and save him? It seems that the rush of contrition (increasingly stressed by Reformers as essential—one suspects, because it is not within the voluntary power of the ego) is alone missing. The blood which streams in the firmament, one drop of which would save his soul, is beyond his reach. Instead, he is for 'the perpetual torture-house' (in the 1616 text, V. ii. 8). Such a watcher of the play would feel the special terror of the final disclosure of one from whom grace was withheld, *though he screamed for it*.

Of course the play as a whole is not clearly doctrinaire Calvinist in its theology. I take it that the concluding 'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight' (Epilogue, 1) is radically unassimilable to a Calvinist reading. It is after all uttered after the event. In Calvinism there are, when all is done, no might-have-beens. More loosely, lines like 'He is in danger to

[17] *Institutes*, I. xviii. 2 ; III. xxiii. 11, ed. McNeill and Battles, vol. i, p. 231, vol. ii, p. 947.

be damned' (I. iii. 51) most naturally imply that we are not faced with a foregone conclusion. The words of the Old Man at V. i. 111-12, 'Accursed Faustus, miserable man, | that from thy soul excludst the grace of heaven', are non-Calvinist because they assume significant moral agency in Faustus, an active excluding of grace rather than a withholding of grace on God's part. But Alan Sinfield is right when he suggests that the play is stretched between two opposite narratives: 'Faustus is damned because he sinned' and 'Faustus sins because he is damned.'[18] Once this is noticed one begins to understand the strange energy, born of radical uncertainty, which permeates the play.

There are signs, incidentally, in the textual history of *Dr Faustus* that early editors felt a repeated need to soften or blur hints of extreme Calvinism in the 1604 text. Where 1604 has Faustus ask himself, 'Accursed Faustus, where is mercy now?' (V. i. 62), 1616 substitutes, 'Accursed Faustus, wretch what hast thou done?' The first reading stresses the unavailability of mercy, the second stresses Faustus's *agency*, the fact that he has brought this horror on himself.

It is time for some close criticism. Let us take the Prologue: a simple, almost primitive exposition of the play's argument? Or is there something strange about it? Look, in particular, at lines 15–28:

> So soon he profits in divinity,
> The fruitful plot of scholarism grac'd,
> That shortly he was grac'd with doctor's name,
> Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes
> In heavenly matters of theology,
> Till swoll'n with cunning of a self-conceit,
> His waxen wings did mount above his reach
> And melting heavens conspir'd his overthrow:
> For falling to a devilish exercise,
> And glutted now with learning's golden gifts,
> He surfeits upon cursed necromancy;
> Nothing so sweet as magic is to him,
> Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss:
> And this the man that in his study sits.
>
> (A text)

[18] *Literature in Protestant England, 1560–1660* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 116.

The major narrative is clear: This is to be the story of one who fell because he sinned, as Icarus in the Greek myth was burned because he flew too high. But remember now the 'second narrative', 'This is the story of one who sinned because he was damned'. I submit that, if we listen hard, we shall find the second narrative already audible, even here in the formal Prologue to the play. According to the first narrative, 'Faustus is damned because he sinned'—and also according to ordinary English grammatical usage—we might have expected the clause, 'Till swoll'n with cunning of a self-conceit', to continue with a personal pronoun and a verb, 'he [that is, Faustus] flew too high'. But that is not what happens. The word 'self' indeed directs our minds to Faustus's antonomous wickedness, but then the expected personal subject of the verb is silently displaced by an impersonal subject—instead of 'he flew too high', 'his waxen wings did mount above his reach': In strict grammar this now means that it was the wings, not Faustus, which were swoll'n with cunning of self-conceit. But no good reader of poetry will accept that. No, the wings have, by an exceedingly subtle species of grammatical metamorphosis, taken over the sentence. And the modification of grammar hints a profound modification of the underlying theology, for we now receive a picture of one carried by forces beyond his control. We are indeed in a grammatical limbo. 'Melting' by ordinary grammar is an active participle going with 'heavens' (meaning 'heavens which are melting' (the wax, understood)). But, now that the overall syntax has been disturbed, the mind is open to an admittedly much odder grammar, a construction analogous to an ablative absolute in Latin (*pennis liquefactis*), so that 'melting' could be comma-ed off, and, with 'wings' understood, bear the meaning 'as they melted': 'and, [they] melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow.' By the time we reach 'heavens *conspir'd* his overthrow' the sentence has turned completely inside out and the second, predestinarian, narrative is momentarily supreme. We may add that although the word *conspire* had a morally neutral sense in the sixteenth century, the sinister sense was simultaneously well established in the language.

What, now, is the function of the sentence beginning, 'For falling to a devilish exercise . . . '? In particular, what is the function of 'For'? Those wedded to the first narrative of sin punished will see it as a loose connective only, referring back to

the entire story of ascent and fall, so that the following account of Faustus's turning to necromancy simply recapitulates the flight of Icarus. Those pre-sensitized to the second narrative will have responded strongly to the relatively unusual word, 'conspir'd', with its powerfully Calvinist theological signal, and will at once take 'for' as introducing an explanation of this conspiracy of heaven. This then gives us, as an illustration of the conspiracy, Faustus's self-immersion in necromancy; he is now sinning because he is damned.

Calvinists are weird about time. This Prologue, likewise, is weird in the way it manipulates time. We are uncertain whether we are being given a linear causal sequence (with recapitulation and back-tracking) or something eerily timeless. This momentary confusion gives a great—an apparently saving—force to the conclusion: 'And this the man that in his study sits.' The curtain is drawn back, one supposes, on a frozen tableau: Faustus in an attitude of profound thought. The whole story is there, in the bent, immovable figure.

One of the great puzzles of history is the question why a theology which taught that no one ever got to heaven by the exertion of his own virtue should have produced not a population of passive libertines but rather the most morally strenuous society the world has ever seen, that of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Perhaps no rational answer is available, but an irrational one offers itself. Virtue did not earn you a place in heaven, but it might be a sign that you had been chosen, 'a mark of election'. Believing this, people behaved virtuously because they wanted to belong to this elect group, and ran all the faster because they could never catch up with the pre-emptive divine causality. They were behaving well in order *to have been chosen* (English grammar coming under strain again).

I borrow the phrase 'in order to have been' from A. J. Ayer who, in his *The Problem of Knowledge*, caught the strangeness of the whole business very well (he is here concerned with the way in which we do not normally allow that later events can be the causes of earlier ones):

> Surely no one in his senses would set himself to bring about a past event. The only example I can think of is that of certain Calvinists, and even this example may be fanciful. It does, however, help explain behaviour which otherwise would seem irrational. Believing, as they

did, in predestination, in the sense that their deity had saved or damned them once for all before they were even born, they were nevertheless, on religious grounds, extremely puritanical. They believed that only salvation mattered, and yet they attached great importance to their conduct, while being convinced that it would make no difference to what lay in store for them. But now suppose that they also believed that only those whom the deity had elected were capable of being virtuous. In that case, being one of the elect would be a necessary condition for being virtuous, from which it would follow, that being virtuous was a sufficient condition of having been chosen one of the elect. If this was their reasoning, then the goal of their puritanism may have lain not in the future but in the past. We may suppose that they abstained from sin in order *to have been saved*.[19]

It may be thought that this is a fix peculiar to those who believe in a God outside space and time. There is, however, a wholly secular version of the paradox put forward by W. A. Newcomb (this paradox is available in various versions).

Imagine a wise and clever psychologist. She explains to all who come that, if they will submit to a character analysis by her, she is ready to pay them £10, £20, £100, or £200 according to the following scheme. At the end of the interview the subject will be asked to withdraw. While the subject is out of the room the psychologist will either put £10 in each of the two boxes on her table or she will put £100 in each. She explains that she will put £10 in each box if she thinks the subject on re-entering the room will open two boxes. She will put £100 in each box if she thinks the subject will open only one. The subject is completely free to open two boxes or one, and receives the contents of any box opened—that is, if he opens two boxes he gets the contents of those two boxes. This means, for example, that if the psychologist thought the subject would open only one box and was wrong, that subject will walk away with £200. Similarly, if the psychologist thought the subject would open two boxes and was, again, wrong, that subject would collect only £10. The psychologist tells the subjects all this at the outset and further explains that she has over the years dealt with thousands of cases and has always been correct in her predictions—that is, on every occasion so

19 *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), p. 174.

far, she has given away either £20 (to 'two-box' people) or £100 (to 'one-box' people). Now suppose you are one of her subjects. The interview is over; you are about to re-enter the room; you know the money is now in the boxes and you can choose to open two or one. What would you do?

Most rational people say, 'Well, it's not a problem. Once the money is in the boxes it obviously makes sense to choose two boxes. If she has decided that I'm a two-box person then, at least, I'll get £20 rather than £10 and if, on the other hand, she has decided that I'm a one-box person then I'll walk off with £200.' So you say, 'Two boxes, please.' The psychologist smiles and says, 'Go ahead.' You open the boxes and collect (as she foresaw) £20. She then says, 'Would you like to observe for a while?' For the rest of the afternoon you sit and watch person after person opening two boxes and collecting £20, with the occasional anomalous person opening one box and getting £100. The psychologist then says, 'Would you like a second go? By the way, I shall be able to predict, from my analysis, the point at which you will "crack"—if you ever will—and open one box, and then of course you will receive £100.' Most two-box people say the point would come when they would choose to open one box, not from sheer boredom but in order to maximize the gain. Philosophers are locked in combat over the question whether it is always irrational to choose one box. Those who believe deeply that rationality is time-bound in a one-directional way, tend to say that it is always irrational to do anything other than open two boxes. Others, less docile to the rule of time, say that it is entirely rational to open one box on the information given. Those who go for one box act as they do in order to *have been* chosen by the psychologist, as fit recipients of £100. The analogy with Calvinism is exact, but the motivation works with twentieth-century unbelievers (notice, however, that an act of faith in the powers of the super-intelligent psychologist is required). Ayer thought he was dealing with a freak of reasoning peculiar to certain long-gone religious eccentrics. It is evident that we are in fact confronted by a deep-seated paradox, exposing the problematic relation of inference and time.

One must suppose that many Protestants were simultaneously destabilized and energized in their faith by a sense that,

while God had already determined their fate in the next world, their own moral behaviour would in due course give a clear indication what that fate was to be. The mind in these circumstances races forward and back over the illegible text of God's purpose. Faustus, in his frequent moments of self-address, again and again seems to be reading the text of his own life: 'Ah, Faustus | Now hast thou but one bare hour to live' (V. ii. 58–9). Conversion, once a single event on, say, the road to Damascus, becomes in Puritan spiritual autobiographies such as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* a sort of oscillatory constant. Everything is crisis, but no crisis is critical; life is a series of *experimenta crucis*, none of which proves anything. Protestants talk endlessly of 'assurance', not because they have it, but because they don't.

Dr Faustus is a vertiginous play as medieval drama is not, because of a very sixteenth-century sense of the intermittent unreality of human time-sequence. The Prologue, as we saw, breaks with the ordinary succession presented in earlier expository choruses in order to backtrack, anticipate, and then to sum up all in a timeless tableau at the close. The really attentive listener will feel a faint giddiness before the play proper has begun.

Let us take from Act 1, scene i, the speech in which Faustus rejects the study of theology, using what Luther calls 'the Devil's syllogism'.[20]

> Jerome's Bible, Faustus, view it well.
> *Stipendium peccati mors est*. Ha! *Stipendium*, *etc.*
> The reward of sin is death? That's hard.
> *Si peccasse negamus*, *fallimur*,
> *et nulla est in nobis veritas*:
> If we say that we have no sin
> We deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us.
> Why then belike we must sin,
> And so consequently die.
> Ay, we must die, an everlasting death.
> What doctrine call you this? *Che sarà*, *sarà*,
> What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu!
>
> (A text, I. i. 38-49)

[20] On the recurrence of this phrase in the writings of Luther, see Susan Snyder, 'The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 12 (1965), pp. 18–59, at p. 31.

Faustus is reasoning from scripture, from Romans 6: 23 and 1 John 1: 8: 'For the wages of sin is death' and 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and truth is not in us'.[21] Older scholars liked to point out that Faustus's syllogism of despair holds only because, in each case, he leaves out the crucial second part of the passage cited. The full text in the Geneva Bible (1560) of Romans 6: 23, is, 'For the wages of sin is death: *but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*', and of 1 John 1: 8–9, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and truth is not in us. *If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.' To suggest that Faustus simply forgets the remainder of the quotation in each case is to make Faustus into an ignorant fool. But everything else, at this stage in the drama, suggests that he is a meteoric intellectual. Could we be missing something?

By Calvinist doctrine, Faustus's reasoning is straightforwardly applicable to man in his natural state, that is, to all not in receipt of grace, to all those who have not been elected by God for heaven. The First Epistle of John says that if we acknowledge our sins God will forgive us, and this appears to allow a significant moral initiative to human beings—something *we* can do, to get out of the hole we are in. But this initiative is, in its turn, very precisely removed by Calvinism.

Protestants were at first cheerful about the new doctrines. The fact that all are sinful suddenly did not matter: *no one* got to heaven by merit: one had only to acknowledge one's sinfulness and all was well. Then it was noticed that the modest act of acknowledging sin looked awfully like a virtuous action. Now the major premiss of Calvinism is that man is totally depraved and therefore any truly virtuous action will have been initiated by God's grace. Of ourselves we can do nothing. This means that you need grace before you can make any proper acknowledgement of your sin. In effect, the door we thought was open has been shut in our faces. It is no longer open to each of us to find salvation by confession and repentance.

[21] Geneva Bible (1560). Faustus tells himself to look in Jerome's Bible but he does not in fact give the Latin words of Jerome's Vulgate. Michael Keefer (*Dr Faustus*, p. 7) suggests that Marlowe himself simply put the wording of the Geneva Bible into Latin.

Those predestined to damnation *cannot* properly acknowledge their sins. This sudden Protestant slippage from hope to despair is well caught in two lines by John Donne: 'Yet Grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack. | But who shall give thee that Grace to beginne?'[22] Donne's ship has broken up on the reef of double predestination. That Marlowe, also, is thinking about predestination here is shown by Faustus's next words,

> What doctrine call you this? Che sarà, sarà,
> What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu!

Michael Keefer has pointed out that in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, the fifteenth Article, 'Of Christ alone without sin', ends with the words, 'if we say we have not sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'—and stops there, just as Faustus did.[23] We are told nothing of the following clause with its offer of mercy to those who acknowledge their sins. Yet this is the central orthodox statement of the Protestant Church in England.

The effect of Calvin's theology is to bring certain moral opposites so closely together that they can no longer be distinguished confidently from one another. Presumption (that is the presumption that God will save my soul) is a sin; yet such presumption looks very like 'confidence of election', which was seen as a mark of sanctity. Meanwhile humility merges strangely with the sin of despair. Here Luther is a shade more radical, more 'inversive', than Calvin.

Calvin confines real despair to the reprobate and to those who have not been converted. At *Institutes*, II. ii. 21 he says that persistent despair is a sign of non-election. Luther's phrase, 'the Devil's syllogism' may actually imply a certain respect for the force of the reasoning, as in 'devilishly clever'. It is likely that Luther would have diagnosed weakness in the response made to this same argument in Thomas Becon's *Dialogue between the Christian Knight and Satan* (1564); there the knight supposes that he can scotch the argument merely by pointing to the 'grace, favour and remission of sins promised in Christ'.[24] In Spenser's

[22] Holy Sonnet iv.

[23] See *Dr Faustus*, ed. Keefer, p. lii.

[24] See *The Catechism of Thomas Becon with other pieces written by him in the reign of King Edward VI*, ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), pp. 628–9.

Faerie Queene the argument forms the climax of Despair's temptation of Redcross (I. ix. 47). Here the effect is truly frightening because of the sheer cogency of what is said. Despair's words 'as a swords point through his hart did perse, | And in his conscience made a secret breach, | Well knowing true all, that he did reherse . . . ' (I. ix. 48). Una rushes to the aid of Redcross, dashes from his hand the knife with which he would have killed himself, and cries, 'Why shouldst thou then despeire, that chosen art?' (I. ix. 53). But suppose one has not been chosen, what then? Despair himself is as sure as anyone ever was of non-election and so falls back into his nightmare routine of endlessly frustrated suicide (I. ix. 54). Luther himself simply warned people not to think about it : companionship, food, and drink will put it out of your mind.[25] Even so, two hundred years later David Hume, feeling himself 'environ'd with [the] darkness' of epistemological scepticism, turned to backgammon and the society of his friends to blot out the argument he could not defeat.[26] Luther, as Susan Snyder points out, places despair at the very centre of Christian experience.[27] In his comment on Psalm 51, 'Have mercy upon me, God', Luther affirms that man must despair.[28] The real sting of the argument is betrayed by a kind of hiccough—an abrupt parenthesis—in the otherwise smooth prose of Susan Snyder's admirable summary: 'Awareness and sorrow for past sin, always the first step of fallen man on his way to salvation, may lead him into such self-loathing that he feels—and therefore *is*—beyond the reach of God's mercy.'[29] It is the afterthought, 'and therefore *is*', which carries the terror.

Notice once more how our reasoning is affected by a chronic tremor; time has again become problematic. Faustus's reasoning

[25] *Tischreden* [Table Talk], no. 1299, in *Dr Martin Luther's Werke*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake *et al.* (Weimar, 1883–): *Tischreden*, 6 vols. (1912–21), vol. ii. (1913), p. 33. See also Snyder, 'The Left Hand of God', p. 41.

[26] *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I. iv. 7, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (1888; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 268.

[27] 'The Left Hand of God', pp. 23–4. See also John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), esp. pp. 17–61.

[28] See *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St Louis, Miss.: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–86), vol. xii (1955), pp. 310–11.

[29] Snyder, 'The Left Hand of God', p. 20.

is wrong if he has been chosen by God, but the very fact that he is saying such things is a mark of non-election, in which case his reasoning is impeccable. The knot has now tightened. It is not just that sinful behaviour is a sign that one is predestined to eternal damnation. The sin of despair is here embodied in an exact and truthful statement of the underlying theology. There but for the grace of God go we.

In the 1616 text the Good Angel says, 'Never too late, if Faustus will repent.' It has been pointed out that this looks like a softening of the harder, more Calvinist reading of the 1604 text, 'Never too late if Faustus can repent' ('will' replacing 'can', II. iii. 81). Michael Keefer writes, 'Enfolded in that conditional clause is the brute question of fact on which the doctrine of double predestination hinges. If Faustus is going to be able to repent, then he is eternally out of trouble and it is never too late; but if he cannot, it will always have been too late.' Look at the time-words in that sentence, 'too late', 'never', and the contorted future-perfect 'will always have been'.[30] Compare A. J. Ayer's future-perfect infinitive, cited earlier, 'in order to have been saved'.

In the ordinary dramatic sequence of *Dr Faustus* this turns into a sort of chronological nightmare, producing a faint sense that time is somehow running backwards, undoing the marks of goodness in Faustus. Act II, scene iii (A text) begins with the words, 'When I behold the heavens then I repent', present tense. Glory be, we *hear* repentance affirmed by Faustus. But eleven lines later we have, 'I will renounce this magic and repent'. The present tense, which might have seemed to secure the present mercy of God, has become a future tense, and God's mercy is so much the further off. Five lines later the future tense becomes a (still fainter) conditional 'God will pity me if I repent'. Then, only two lines after that, we find, 'My heart's so hardened I cannot repent' (II. iii. 18).

As Faustus's heart hardens, the doctrine of predestination hardens round him, like concrete. I have said that a medieval person might well be puzzled that one who clearly wishes he had not done what he has done, and calls on Christ, should nevertheless be damned. If the contrition is missing that may

[30] *Dr Faustus*, ed. Keefer, p. li.

be, as we saw, because God, not Faustus, has hardened Faustus's heart. This is all painful enough, yet it is given a further twist at V. ii. 26 ff. The 'third scholar' says, 'Yet Faustus, call on God', and Faustus answers, 'On God, whom Faustus hath abjured? On God, whom Faustus hath blasphemed? Ah my God, I would weep, but the devil draws in my tears. Gush forth blood instead of tears, yea life and soul!' By the law of moral extremes meeting in Calvinism the first two sentences look less like absence of contrition than a contrition so extreme that it merges with the sin of despair—as if Faustus is morally ashamed to call on God. Yet the third sentence actually begins with the words, 'Ah my God'. In context this cannot be a mere expletive. It must be a prayer. Faustus, having said that he is too enmeshed in sin to call on God, then succeeds in doing just that. Still, Faustus cannot weep. Is there anyone left who will infer from this physical restraint that Faustus was not really sorry at all?

We are watching the conclusion of a tragedy—that is to say, a death which is not bleakly deserved but is in some way terrible. It is terrible because the narrative of just punishment for sin is fused with another narrative of predestined damnation and future everlasting torture. Calvin was very willing to say that God is terrible but would never say that he is wicked—only that he is inscrutable. Marlowe conversely finds in the terror of God a space for moral criticism, a space for the special blasphemy of Christian tragedy.

All this is possible because the age was not, as the Old Historicists would have it, harmoniously unified in its ideology but on the contrary was fraught with extremist oppositions in theology. Up to this point I have in effect confined myself to the stranger features of radical Calvinism. I have said nothing about that still stranger theology, Gnosticism, and its connection with Marlowe's play. It is now necessary to do so.

(ii) Flying Men and Gnostics

Technically, Gnosticism gets into *Dr Faustus* by way of material relating to Simon Magus. He is the magician in Acts 8 who tries to buy the gift of conferring the Holy Spirit from the Apostles. Early stories of Simon tell of his apotheosis of a reincarnated

Helen of Troy[31] and his being dashed to earth when he tries to fly to heaven[32] (he engages Peter in a magic competition[33]). All these elements appear in Marlowe's play. Philip Brockbank writes, 'The play's rhetoric of wonder, space and flight may be called Simonian.'[34] There are clear signs that Marlowe got hold of the Simonian material not only from the play's principal source, the 'English Faust Book' of 1592 (which sets up an analogy between Faustus and Simon[35]) but also from the apocryphal Acts of Peter and Paul (second century AD) and the *Recognitions*, attributed to Clement of Rome (fourth century AD). Philip Brockbank writes that two incidents in particular show that Marlowe found his way to these earlier sources, the demon dogs and the trick beheading.[36] But more important than either of these, as Brockbank sees,[37] is the conception of Helen in Marlowe's play.

Simon Magus, or Simon of Samaria, is said to have travelled about with a sexual companion whom he identified with Helen of Troy (resuscitated by him). In the 'English Faust Book' Faustus's Helen is a 'common concubine and bedfellow'[38] merely, and we find the same picture in the remoter source which lies behind the 'English Faust Book', the 'German Faust Book' of 1581 (also referred to as the 'Spies Faust Book' because Johann Spies was the publisher, and as the *Historia*, according to its own title-page). But Marlowe's Helen is 'heavenly', can make Faustus immortal with a kiss, she 'sucks forth his soul' (A text,V. i. 85, 93, 94)—in short is instinct with the special exaltation of the Gnostic Helen which we find in the *Recognitions*. There we are told, first, that Simon's foremost disciple and lover is Luna, the Moon, who has been 'brought down from heaven and is wisdom, the

31 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I. 23, ed. Rousseau, vol. i, p. 314.

32 *Acts of the Holy Apostles, Peter and Paul*, in Philip Mason Palmer and Robert Pattison More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition from Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), p. 34.

33 Ibid., pp. 30–1.

34 *Marlowe: Dr Faustus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), p. 11.

35 See Palmer and More, *Sources*, p. 214.

36 *Marlowe: Dr Faustus*, p. 10.

37 Ibid., p. 11. Cf. *Dr Faustus*, ed. Keefer, p. xlvi.

38 *The English Faust Book*, ed. John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 172.

mother of all things', and in the Clementine *Homilies* (Book ii, chapter 35) we are told that the same person is named Helena.[39] The Clementine *Recognitions*, in the Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia were, if not popular, then at least enthusiastically read during the Renaissance (there were editions at Basel in both 1526 and 1536). Now listen to Marlowe's Faustus:

> O thou art fairer than the evening air
> Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;
> Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter,
> When he appeared to hapless Semele,
> More lovely than the monarch of the sky
> In wanton Arethusa's azur'd arms . . .
>
> (A text, V. i. 104–9)

In the Wisdom of Solomon in the biblical Apocrypha, we read that Wisdom is 'more beautiful than the sun . . . I have loved her and sought her from my youth . . . such love I had to her beauty' (7: 29; 8: 2). If we allow that Marlowe is echoing this passage then, as Keefer notes in his edition, Helen is now implicitly linked with Wisdom.

It may be thought that the passage needs no such learned gloss, that it is a straightforward Elizabethan celebration of beauty. But, given the undoubted relation of Faustus's Helen to Simon's (and so to Wisdom and Luna), the analogy becomes difficult to resist. Giordano Bruno wrote in his *Oratio Valedictoria* of 1588 'Sophia, Wisdom itself, beautiful as the moon, great as the sun'.[40] Marlowe's poetry is not a simple stringing together of isolable 'beauties'; he draws in a structured fashion on the huge *musée imaginaire* of the Renaissance. As the sun which burned Icarus in the Chorus to Act I may be that God who could not endure that his creatures should acquire knowledge, so here Faustus's Helen may be the Luna of the magi, the Wisdom of the heretical Gnostics. If we venture further afield in Gnostic writings we find that Helen is closely associated with the paradoxical streak of sexual libertinism which recurs in world-despising Gnosticism. Helen, the prostitute of Tyre liberated by Simon Magus is called *prunikos*,

39 See ibid., p. 75, n. 31.
40 See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 311 ff.

'lewd'.[41] It might be thought that such an epithet would differentiate her firmly from 'Wisdom', but we should remember that Wisdom is herself, originally, a tainting of the pleromatic divinity. Giovanni Filoramo (or his English translator) gives a wonderful air of cheerful ordinariness to the entire bizarre scene when he says that Simon and his companion were destined to become 'the model of every ideal Gnostic couple'.[42]

If the earlier sources are admitted to be relevant it is clear that Simon is associated with a Gnostic theology. Indeed Irenaeus said he was the first of the Gnostics.[43] The position of Christ in the Gnostic hierarchy is, as we have seen, variable. The Mandaean Gnostics saw him as a prophet of false doctrine;[44] more often he is a humane principle, in opposition to the tyrant, Jehovah.[45] The Ophites, who appear to have identified the serpent of Genesis with Christ, were known to the Renaissance through Irenaeus and Augustine. The great Renaissance magician Cornelius Agrippa, whom Faustus mentions with evident admiration at I. i. 118, refers to the Ophites in the first chapter of his *De Vanitate*.[46] Simon Magus claimed to be Christ, the true divinity in opposition to that false God who created the world: 'He wishes himself to be believed to be an exalted power, which is above God the Creator, and to be thought to be the Christ . . . '[47] In the Acts of Peter and Paul Simon cunningly contrives that a ram is beheaded in his stead; he boasts beforehand, 'If I rise again, know that I am the son of God'; afterwards he says, 'As I promised, I have risen again on

41 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxix. 4, ed. Rousseau, vol. xi, p. 362; in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 168. See N. A. Dahl, 'The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia', in B. Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980–1), vol. ii, p. 708 n. 47.

42 *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 147.

43 *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxiii. 2, ed. Rousseau, vol. xi, p. 314 (not in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*). See also E. C. Richardson, 'Faust and the Clementine Recognitions', *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, 6 (1894), 133–45; Karl P. Wintersdorf, 'Some Observations on the Historical Faust', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), 201–23.

44 See E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 6 and the same writer's *The Secret Adam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. xi–xii.

45 Augustine, *De Haeresibus* I. xxvii, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xlii, p. 28. See also Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 94.

46 See appendix 3 of *Dr Faustus*, ed. Keefer, p. 186.

47 *Clementine Recognitions*, II. vii, in Palmer and More, *Sources*, p. 12.

the third day.'[48] The sixteenth-century humanist Trithemius says that the historical Faust claimed to be able to do all that Christ could do.[49]

Does *Marlowe's* Dr Faustus ever equate himself with Christ? Yes, he does. At A text, II. i. 74 he says, '*Consummatum est*: this bill is ended'. *Consummatum est*, 'It is finished', were, according to the Gospel of John (19: 30) the last words of Christ on the cross. It may be said that the echo is without significance. It is true, I think, that, oddly enough, a culture steeped in the Bible is much *more* capable of non-significant use of scriptural phraseology than is a secularized culture. If we do the now relatively rare thing of citing Scripture we are likely to be very conscious of what we are doing precisely because it is unusual. In the fourteenth-century *Sir Orfeo* the King says to the Queen, Heurodis, 'whither thou gost, Ichil with the' (129). These words formally, but only formally, echo the words of the exiled Ruth to Naomi in the Bible, 'whither thou goest, I will go' (Ruth 1: 16). Here I strongly suspect that the original context of the words is not *used*, poetically.[50]

But it seems to me quite impossible to take Faustus's '*Consummatum est*' in this way. The play itself is theological, through and through. Of course Faustus offers us a hideously distorted version of Christ's assertion. But with the distortion comes a frightening echo. For Christ on the cross, likewise, was paying a debt, had made a pact with the Devil. The violence is, so to speak, a deeply structured violence.

The Gnostic identification of Faustus with Christ *against* the Father is not, of course, consistently maintained. When Lucifer says, 'Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just; | There's none but I have interest in the same' Christ is strongly allied with the Father, against Lucifer and his prize, Faustus. Yet later Faustus calls on Christ and is at once racked with pain (V. ii. 72-3). Remember that the most orthodox Calvinist could and would say that God willed this torment, used the Devil for this purpose. The final words of Faustus seem to bring the Father and the Devil still more closely together. He is at last to see what Mephistophilis was cut off from (I. iii. 77), the face of

48 Ibid., p. 32.
49 Ibid., p. 85.
50 I owe this example to Dr Mark Griffith.

God—and it is a mask of ferocity: 'My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!' (V. ii. 112). Then, a line later, he cries, 'Come not Lucifer!' We are dealing now with an intermittent effect, which plays like lightning over the ultimate, nightmare scene of the play. Christ's blood, streaming in the firmament, is like, for those that remember, the black streamers which Tamburlaine would have set in the firmament to 'signify the slaughter of the gods' (2 *Tamburlaine*, V. iii. 48–50). This is a playwright of licentious theological imagination. A little before he utters Christ's words, *consummatum est*, Faustus cuts his arm. Tamburlaine also cuts his arm and asks his sons to search the wound, as a test of their loyalty and resolve (2 *Tamb*., III. ii. 126). Christ asked doubting Thomas to put his fingers in his wound.

Yet the Faustus who calls on an absent Christ (V. ii. 72) cannot himself be Christ. Here, it might be thought, the heretical analogy of the Gnostics must be finally crushed. Yet, in the strangest of all scriptural passages for orthodox Christians, Christ on the cross cries out that he, who is God, has been forsaken by God. When, moments before the end, Faustus, abandoned by the Creator, cries out 'My God, my God'[51] we can scarcely avoid expecting the rest of the cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matthew 27: 46), but instead we get, 'Look not so fierce on me!' The cry of dereliction is *overtaken* and displaced in the sentence by the face of terror, as the folly of Icarus, in the Prologue, was overtaken by the conspiracy of heaven. It is as if, by a final horror, the feared absence of God proves less dreadful than his presence. The wings of Icarus in the myth are burned by the fire of a sun which is identical with the god of the heavens. Is the fire which burns Faustus the opposite of God or identical with his will? Calvin, for whom everything happens by the will of God,[52] would affirm without hesitation that the second alternative is the right one.

[51] In the 1604 text only; 1616 has 'O mercy Heaven'. The fact that the change was made suggests strongly that contemporaries of Marlowe noticed the biblical echo and were made uncomfortable by it.

[52] *Institutes*, I. xvi. 8, ed. McNeill and Battles, vol. i, p. 208. Cf. ibid., I. xviii. 2 (vol. i, pp. 228–31), where Calvin opposes those who say that evil happens by God's permission rather than by his will, and I. xiv. 17 (vol. i, pp. 175–6), where he writes that Satan can do nothing unless God also wills it and assents to it. Cf. François Wendel, *Calvin: Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), p. 138.

The words of the divine Christ echo those of the human psalmist, *Deus, Deus, cur dereliquisti me?* (Psalm 22; Vulgate 21). I have suggested that radical Protestantism, far from being a harmonious field of shared belief, was a site of crisis where ethical and theological extremes met dangerously. This is nowhere so evident as in the response, not of cranky sectarians or remote Gnostics, but of admired divines of the period to the cry of dereliction. Luther himself, commenting on Psalm 22, cites Galatians 3: 13, 'Christ was made accursed for our sake'.[53] He devotes many words to the fact that, where the Psalmist says, 'O God, O God, why hast thou forsaken me?', Christ says '*My* God, my God . . . ', the word 'my' still asserting a link with God even as that link seems to have been severed. The way in which preachers tracked to and fro over those opening words, 'My God, my God', made it the more inevitable that Faustus's use of the phrase would be picked up as the beginning of a cry of dereliction. At the same time, however, Luther repeatedly affirms[54] that the passage shows a consciousness of sin in Christ. In his 1535 lectures on Galatians he rejected the papist idea that Christ accepted the consequence of our sin only, and instead asserted that the words of Scripture are everywhere that Christ sinned. The papists who flinch from this wish, says Luther, 'to unclothe Him from our sins, to make Him innocent . . . This is to abolish Christ'.[55] Christ himself, he remarks in another place (herein disagreeing with Calvin), despaired.[56] Luther has a way of making these points very strongly, as it were with a crash of the fist on the table, and then hedging them afterwards with (wholly incompatible) qualifications. In his 'Table Talk' he later allowed, perhaps more frankly, that he found the cry of dereliction simply inexplicable.[57] If the great doctor of Protestantism can say such things, can we any longer suppose

53 *Werke*, Weimar edn., vol. v, p. 603.

54 Ibid., p. 604.

55 *Luther's Works*, ed. Pelikan, vol. xxvi (1963), p. 279.

56 *Werke*, Weimar edn., vol. v, p. 602. Cf. *Luther's Works*, ed. Pelikan, vol. xii (1955), pp. 310–11, (comment on Psalm 51), where Luther makes it clear that sin is the essence of man and that it is the business of theology to make man aware of this fact. See also Erich Vogelsang, *Der Angefochtene Christus bei Luther* (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1932), pp. 45–52.

57 No. 5493, *Luther's Works*, ed. Pelikan, vol. liv (1967), p. 430.

it impossible that Marlowe, the homosexual rake, the spy, with his reputation for atheism, might give expression to a similar momentary shaking of the foundations of Christianity?

I am arguing not for a systematic Marlovian critique of Christian orthodoxy but for something which, by its very nature, slips through our fingers: a centrifugal wildness whereby those images and figures which formerly constituted the bedrock of faith can oscillate and exchange ethical identities. Lewis believed Blake to be a local aberration, his thought simply inapplicable to previous ages which knew, if they knew nothing else, that God was good and the serpent evil. We have learned, I think, that Lewis was wrong. It is quite hard now to identify any 'thought which could not be thought' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That the God of Love might be a God of Hate; that the Trinity might be a less than happy family, where the Father hates the Son? All these were possible thoughts. You may wish to exclude such sick heresies from your mind when you read or watch *Dr Faustus*. I myself claim for them only an intermittent (but real) presence. Actors who are superstitious about many things are naturally afraid of a play in which the Devil is conjured, and appears. Perhaps their instinct is right. Dr Faustus raised the devil of tradition and, behind him, in the shadows, the devil of a moral unrest which is not easily appeased.

Meanwhile, beyond the confines of Marlowe's play, certain difficulties persist. I have presented Hermetism and Calvinism as opposites, but the admission of Gnosticism to our scheme permits various connections to be made. Calvinism is like Gnosticism in its binary division of reality: for Calvin as for the Gnostics God is wholly other, remote, *absconditus,* and all that is not God, that is, the world, is vile. In the Hermetical treatise *Poimandres*, meanwhile, Anthropos, the divine man, actually falls through knowledge (and the fall is a real fall, not an obscure promotion). The reason is that he has fallen prey to the female side of himself, and become acquainted with *Physis*, 'Nature'.[58]

Here, it might seem, your Hermetical 'optimist', for all his

[58] In Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 454–5. See also Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, p. 108.

obvious debt to Gnostic thought, is no friend to Faustus, for Faustus's knowledge is magico-scientific: he seeks and obtains powers over *nature*. It appears that I am repeatedly forced to make a wholly disabling concession. No sooner had I laid down, as the basic thesis of this book, the proposition that in the Gnostic Trinity the Son is superior to the Father than I had to explain that in 'deep Gnostic' Theory there is a pleromatic *true* Father, to whom the Son is actually inferior, as in Christian Arian theology. I have similarly had to explain that primal Wisdom, which looks and sounds like an exciting, desirable thing in Simonian legend and in Marlowe's play, is actually a tainting of—a falling away from—pleromatic perfection. But the wicked Demiurge Jehovah did become vivid in Gnostic thought and to that creating 'Father' Christ is certainly superior. In like manner the Gnostic hatred of the body certainly did, in due course, issue in its own apparent opposite, libertine Gnosticism. It may be that the psychology of this transformation has something to do with a certain kind of triumphant demonstration: the pure prove their purity by wallowing in filth and emerging unspotted (here we may think of certain Antinomian Ranters of the seventeenth century, to whom we shall come in the fourth chapter of this book). Hans Jonas has argued that we can trace in Gnosticism a transition from negative libertinism to positive,[59] that is a move from the notion that, since truth is transcendent what we do here does not matter, to a positive obligation to perform licentious actions (for example the Carpocratians and the Cainites, as described in the pages of Irenaeus).[60] In Sethian Gnosticism, however, *gnosis* itself is, as Giovanni Filoramo explains it, seen as a kind of drama, instinct with a certain erotic *pathos* ('feeling', 'passion'), inherently set to 'explode' with the 'sin' of wisdom.[61] We have reached a point at which the 'deep roots' of Gnosticism appear, simply, as anti-Gnostic. If we view matters, so to speak, from the pleromatic end of the system, *gnosis* is the agent of corruption, just as it is in the most

[59] *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 273.

[60] *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxv. 3–5, ed. Rousseau, vol. xi, pp. 336–40. Cf. Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, with an English translation by Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1926–32), vol. i, pp. 316–18.

[61] *History of Gnosticism*, p. 66.

orthodox Christian interpretation of Adam's sin and Faust's. But if *gnosis* itself has a built-in principle of transformation, so has the philosophy of *gnosis*, Gnostic*ism*. The theology is itself a moving, metamorphic thing. There can be no doubt that *gnosis* became a term of positive value. Why else do we call them 'the Gnostics'?

The truth is that, as Blake understood very well, the human mind delights in movement and is repelled by the static. Even Roman Stoics like Seneca begin by commending *apatheia*, 'emotion-less-ness', then move to commending the (much more interesting) subjugation of emotion[62] and end by writing tragedies in which the heroes, far from being statuesque, unresponsive figures, are violently passionate. Simon Magus, if Irenaeus is to be believed, had travelled some distance on the road from austere moralism to a gleeful immoralism, affirming that 'righteous works are not so by nature: the angels who made the world decreed them as such, in order through precepts of this kind to bring men into servitude'.[63] Here morality, as we in this corrupt world understand it, is rejected. But what other morality have we? We are not so very far from the unguarded remark attributed to Marlowe in the 'Baines note': 'The first beginning of Religion was only to keep men in awe'.[64]

The movement in Gnosticism from austerity to libertinism was swift. The exaltation of transcendent knowledge above knowledge of nature, on the other hand, persisted for a very long time. I have said that the mind is repelled by the merely static; meanwhile, however, it would seem that for many the promise of super-transcendent verities, beyond the reach of ordinary parsons and ordinary theologies, holds considerable attraction. The unfettered, unverifiable, unfalsifiable, unusable, horribly easy multiplication of higher orders, dyads, triads, decads, and archons, inducing, as it seems to me, a kind of melt-down in the mind, will always be delightful to some.

[62] *De Constantia Sapientis*, ix. 3, in Seneca, *Moral Essays*, with an English translation by John W. Basore, 3 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1928–35), vol. i, pp. 74–6.

[63] *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxiii. 3, ed. Rousseau, vol. ii, p. 318.

[64] For the Baines note, see Millar Maclure (ed.), *Marlowe: The Critical Heritage 1588–1896* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 36–7.

The minutely detailed ascription of specific angelic powers to different parts of the body, as in the Apocryphon of John[65] is no better. Many readers of the Prophetic Books of Blake come to feel as they read that the whole monstrous organism is proliferating from an inner, non-cognitive principle: one senses, as it might be, that one is reading a mythical version of what is now seen as an episode in the History of Ideas, the replacement of a religious world-wide view by scientific rationalism, but more things happen in the myth than can be supplied in the original historical sequence. So with Gnosticism: one senses that the drive to nest story within story (all set before the creation of the world) can hardly give those of us who live in this world anything we can make use of, or indeed anything which, placed as we are, we could have any reason to believe true.

The Gnostic hostility to *Physis*, 'Nature', in the myth of primal Wisdom, translates naturally into a hostility to science. The mythical figure of Prometheus may serve as a useful indicator here. For Shelley Prometheus is a noble Gnostic rebel against the tyrant God; he is both Christlike and Luciferan. Blakean readers of *Paradise Lost* naturally think of Milton's Satan as a Promethean figure. Prometheus was nailed to his rock by Zeus. Who nailed Christ to the cross? We know who cast Satan into hell. For the Valentinian Gnostics, however, Prometheus was no hero; he was the bearer of ignorant, demiurgical reason—*this* worldly-reason. But the sheer interest of variegated, natural knowledge began to assert itself, in due course, within Gnosticism. One Zosimus, an alchemist from Panopolis in Egypt who lived in the fourth century AD, did see Prometheus as the noble antagonist of the tyrant God.[66] Zosimus is clearly delighted by the warning given by Prometheus to his brother Epimetheus in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (86–7), 'never to accept a gift from Olympian Zeus, but send it back'. Prometheus is now the type of the philosopher. Zosimus has still enough transcendentalism in his constitution to induce him to make Prometheus loyal to the true God

[65] Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 41–2.

[66] In his treatise *Omega*, in *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, M. P. E. Berthelot (Paris: Georgen, Steinheil Publique, 1888), p. 229.

beyond the Demiurge, but the alchemist in Zosimus could not fail to respond gratefully, not just to the fact that Prometheus rebelled against Zeus, but also to the fact that he stole fire from heaven.

Giovanni Filoramo is clear that in Gnosticism knowledge is 'meta-rational knowledge'.[67] The 1966 Congress of Messina on the origins of Gnosticism laid down as its final protocol the proposition that *gnosis* means 'knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an élite'.[68] But meanwhile 'wisdom' (*sophia*, *sapientia*) can move a little more freely into the sphere of nature and particularity; thereafter, through its natural affinity with knowledge, it is able to draw *gnosis* after it. I said earlier that Hermetism was 'no friend to Faustian enquiry' because Hermetism shares with Gnosticism proper an initial hostility to natural knowledge. But the shift towards interest in nature discernible in Gnostic sources is traceable also in quasi-Gnostic Hermetists. Cornelius Agrippa wrote in his *De Occulta Philosophia* (it is a passage to which we shall return), 'So man . . . elevated by these theological virtues [is able to] command . . . the elements, drive away mists, collect the clouds into rain, cure diseases . . . '.[69] This smells strongly of magic, but there is, intermixed, a whiff of nascent science.

Today we think of science as a co-operative enterprise, self-critical, committed to publishing, opposed to occultism, secrecy, and magic. Science and arcane magic, however, were once virtually indistinguishable. Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* looks like a magician, *simpliciter*, to us. But his magic is not the fairy-tale magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He is much more like the real Dr John Dee (1527–1608), hermetical philosopher, 'crystallomantic', scientist, conjurer, astrologer, and fraud. The move in 'natural philosophy' from hermetical secrecy to openness seems to be largely the work of Francis Bacon, who invented scientific committees. Everyone who has read the *Redargutio Philosophiarum* remembers the

67 *History of Gnosticism*, p. 39.

68 Ibid., p. 143. See also U. Bianchi, *Le origini dello gnosticismo* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. xx.

69 *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, III. vi, trans. 'J.F.' (London: printed by R.W. for G. Moule, 1651), p. 357. For Agrippa's Latin, see *Henrici Cornelii Agrippae Opera* (Lyons: 1600), facsimile reprint, ed. Popkin, vol. i, p. 321.

picture Bacon gives of the modest bearing of the philosopher, in implicit contrast with the titanic self-assertion of the magician.[70] There is a certain irony in the intellectual career of Bacon, as Paolo Rossi noticed.[71] Public relations apart, Bacon did little of real note in the history of science and ended, in his *Sylva Sylvarum*, by borrowing from the very magician–scientists he had previously attacked, Cardano, Porta, Dee, and Fludd.

The sequence is clear enough. Wisdom comes to be associated with knowledge of the secrets of nature and with thaumaturgy, wonder-working. Solomon, the wisest of kings in the Bible, was surrounded in medieval legend, as E. M. Butler writes, 'with animated and speaking metal images of men'. She adds,

> The medieval alchemists for their part were aiming at discovering the secrets of nature; and some of them believed that this could be accomplished by hatching out in the laboratory male and female *homunculi* from human blood. Astonishingly intricate experiments were advocated if not undertaken by ingenious, learned and disordered minds. Paracelsus was one of them.[72]

Francis Bacon's namesake, the Franciscan Roger Bacon, was known as *doctor mirabilis*, 'the marvellous doctor'. In thirteenth-century Oxford he recommended attentiveness to nature, and wrote works on botany and physics. In 1277 he appears to have been condemned by the General of the Franciscan order for 'suspect novelties' and 'dangerous doctrine' and to have been imprisoned. The legend-makers went to work on him as they had on Solomon. He too had his automaton, the famous 'brazen head'. Robert Greene's play, *Frier Bacon and Frier Bungay* (1594) is later than *Dr Faustus* but it too involves conjuring the Devil, in close association with knockabout humour (the Devil, when conjured, speaks

[70] *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, 7 vols. (London: Longman, 1857–9), vol. iii, pp. 559–60.

[71] *Francesco Bacone: Dalla magia alla scienza* (Bari: Biblioteca di Cultura Moderna, 1957).

[72] *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), pp. 80, 82. For the experiment with blood E. M. Butler cites J. Scheible, but modestly omits Scheible's assertion that menstrual blood was used. See his *Das Kloster*, 12 vols. (Leipzig: T. Thomas, 1845–9), vol. iii, pp. 542–6.

from inside the metal head). It may be that Roger Bacon's reputation as a martyr of science is ill founded, but Marlowe seems to have bought it, at least for the purposes of *Dr Faustus*. Valdes says, 'Then haste thee to some solitary grove, | And bear wise Bacon's and Albanus works' (III. i. 154–5). 'Albanus' seems to be an error for 'Abanus'. Petrus de Abanus (*c.*1250–1316) was posthumously convicted of heresy and burned in effigy by the Inquisition.

It may be objected that stories of magical feats attached themselves to Virgil in the Middle Ages[73] but that no one concludes from these that Virgil was regarded as some sort of experimental scientist. Nevertheless, when Dr Faustus arrives as a tourist in Naples, he is keen to see the golden tomb of Virgil and 'the way he cut, an English mile in length, | Through a rock of stone, in one night's space' (III. i. 14–5). Michael Scott (*c.*1175—*c.*1235), who was astrologer at the court of Frederick II in Palermo, compared Virgil with Simon Magus.[74] The astrologer himself seems to have escaped martyrdom, though Dante sent him to hell. He appears in *Inferno*, xx. 116–17, as 'Michele Scotto . . . che veramente | delle magiche frode seppe il gioco' ('Michael Scott . . . who truly knew the game of magic frauds').

We are in the world described by E. M. Butler: a landscape dotted with 'the works of Daedalus, the statue of Memnon, the oracular heads of antiquity and Prometheus's living men of clay'.[75] It is not the world of *Tamburlaine* nor is it the world of the *Jew of Malta*; but to a startling extent it actually is the world of *Dr Faustus*. For E. M. Butler the figure who above all directed the attention of the Middle Ages to the construction of automata is the same figure who haunts *Dr Faustus*, Simon Magus.[76]

Simon indeed remains the all-important link. We have seen conjurers and alchemists seeking to form human beings from metal and from blood. Simon boasted that he had made a man

73 See D. P. A. Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, trans. E. F. M. Benecke (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895).

74 See Patrick Grant, *Culture, Bodies and the Political Imaginary*, and J. H. Whitfield, 'Vergil into Dante', in D. R. Dudley (ed.), *Vergil* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 94 ff.

75 *The Myth of the Magus*, p. 80.

76 Ibid., p. 80.

from air.[77] As the story is told in the *Clementine Recognitions* it is immediately embedded in a Gnostic philosophy. Simon compares his feat of creation with God's: God created from clay but he, Simon, is superior because he has made *his* man from the purer medium of air. God here is clearly the despised Demiurge, the imperfect workman, of Gnosticism. Meanwhile in the Hermetical *Poimandres*, when the archetypal human being 'saw the Demiurge's creation in the fire it too wanted to act as Demiurge . . . it wanted to break through the spherical wall of their orbits'.[78] Even here, where, because the context is Hermetical, we have a good Demiurge, there is a faint sense of cosmic competitiveness, of overstepping starry boundaries.

The note of arrogance was to prove congenial to the Renaissance and especially to Marlowe. Once we are alerted to the possibility of such thoughts, we may catch hints of them elsewhere, in less obviously hell-bent writings. In Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* one can trace, just as one can in *Dr Faustus*, a collision of Calvinist pessimism with Hermetical optimism. The latter is signalled, as in Marlowe and Cornelius Agrippa, by imagery of ascent into the firmament. As we saw, Sidney concedes to the radical Protestant opposition that we have a fallen will, but he will not follow Calvin in saying that man's mind and imagination are likewise fallen. Instead, he urges that we have, still, 'an erected wit'.[79] Those who know the Renaissance will already have begun to smell brimstone. In Calderón's *El Magico Prodigioso* (1637) it is the Devil who says, 'La gracia sola perdi, la ciencia no' ('It was grace only that I lost, not knowledge').[80] In the anonymous *Panegyrico por la poesia* of 1627 which fascinated Curtius, we are told that the Devil was a poet because, although through his fall he lost 'the works of will', yet 'the works of the mind remained to him . . . '.[81] Under cover of the phrase 'erected wit' the exalted

77 *Clementine Recognitions*, II. xiii, in Palmer and More, *Sources*, p. 18.

78 In Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 454. I have changed Layton's 'Craftsman' to 'Demiurge'.

79 *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten, p. 79.

80 Jornada tercera, 548, in Calderón de la Barca, *El Magico Prodigioso: Casa con dos puertas mala es de guardar* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982), p. 85.

81 See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953). p. 557.

imaginings of the Hermetists can find expression in the *Defence*, and Sidney is soon writing of the poet freely ranging in the *zodiac* of his wit. He almost begins to think of the poet as a better maker than God. This world, after all, is brazen; 'the poets only deliver a golden'.[82] Of course Sidney is more modest (to put it mildly) than Simon Magus: he implicitly attributes super-divine powers not to himself but to the whole tribe of poets. But, for all that, we are within an ace of full Gnosticism. The danger is averted by the doctrine of the Fall. If nature fell when Adam fell, there is no great impiety, after all, in alleging that man might, in imagination, improve on this corrupted world. Sidney, I suspect, knew that his speculation had become risky; one can watch him in the course of a page shifting prudently from the religious conception 'erected', meaning 'unfallen', to safer classical terminology such as 'golden' in 'the poets only deliver a golden', the ages of gold and bronze replacing (say) Paradise and the fallen after-time. Thereafter Sidney rapidly distances himself from the whole perilous subject, turning to 'the more ordinary opening' of the poet as imitator of (this) world.[83]

Flight is a key image, in Renaissance Gnosticism, Hermetism, and in *Dr Faustus*. Earlier I cited J. P. Brockbank's words, 'The play's rhetoric of wonder, space and flight may be called Simonian'.[84] In the Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul we can read the story of Simon's challenging Peter and Paul to a magic competition, in the presence of the emperor, Nero. Compare the way Faustus, in Marlowe's play, undertakes to perform before the emperor Charles V (IV. i). We are now in an echo chamber. A magician who may have been Trithemius, the humanist scientist–magician who lived from 1462 to 1516, according to Luther, entertained the emperor Maximilian by having demons assume the form of Alexander the Great and other monarchs.[85] In *Dr Faustus* Charles V challenges Faustus to produce Alexander the Great and his paramour (A

[82] *Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten, p. 78.

[83] Ibid., p. 79.

[84] *Marlowe: Dr Faustus*, p. 11.

[85] *Tischreden* (Table Talk), no. 4450, in *Tischreden*, vol. iv (1916), p. 319; in *Luthers Werke*, ed. Otto Clemen, 8 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Grunter, 1950–9), vol. viii, pp. 347–8.

text, IV. i. 27–36); Faustus does so (IV. i. 63). The scene has to be played very fast—the tempo is almost that of farce—but nevertheless it anticipates, poetically, the deeply moving conjuring of Helen of Troy, which follows at A text,V. i. 85 ff.; this time Faustus is not pirouetting before an emperor but is alone with Mephistophilis. The lyric poetry blazes as Marlowe forges a link back to Simon Magus, the great original. For Helen was, as we saw, the paramour of Simon.

The Acts of Peter and Paul gives the story of Simon before Nero as follows:

> Simon said: Listen O Caesar Nero, that thou mayest know these men are liars, and that they have been sent from the heavens: tomorrow I go up into the heavens, that I may make those who believe in me blessed, and show my wrath upon those who have denied me.
>
> Then Nero ordered a lofty tower to be made in the Campus Martius and all the people and the dignities [*sic*] to be present at the spectacle . . .
>
> Then Simon went up upon the tower in the face of all, and, crowned with laurels, he stretched forth his hands, and began to fly. And when Nero saw him flying, he said to Peter, This Simon is true; but thou and Paul are deceivers. To whom Peter said: Immediately, shalt thou know that we are true disciples of Christ; but that he is not Christ, but a magician, and a malefactor . . .
>
> And Peter, looking steadfastly against Simon, said: I adjure you, ye angels of Satan, who are carrying him into the air, to deceive the hearts of the unbelievers, by the God that created all things, and by Jesus Christ, whom on the third day he raised from the dead, no longer from this hour to keep him up, but to let him go. And immediately, being let go, he fell into a place called Sacra Via, that is, Holy Way, and was divided into four parts, having perished by an evil fate.[86]

Like Icarus, like Faustus, Simon flies too high. Notice how, in this piously orthodox, anti-Simonian account, Simon does, for a time at least, perform his promise. He brags that he can fly and fly he does. Peter brings him down by a special intervention; he adjures the wicked angels who are sustaining Simon, in the name of one stronger than they, to let him fall.

E. M. Butler thought there were signs of a similar *agon*, or competition, in the story of Christ's encounter with John the

[86] Palmer and More, *Sources*, pp. 32–4

Baptist in Scripture.[87] When John acknowledges that Christ is greater than he (Matthew 3: 11; Mark 1: 7) this could be the trace of the loser's concession: 'You win'. 'He that cometh after me is preferred before me' are the words of John in St John's Gospel (1: 27). Certainly the stories as we have them show John as the entirely docile prophet of Christ, giving way before him; yet I am not confident that E. M. Butler's instinct was misplaced. When two charismatic baptizers arrive at the same time in the same place, competition is liable, one feels, to break out.

It may be said that the superiority of Christ is obvious from the beginning in all the Gospel narratives. But in Luke there is also a striking (if temporary) *symmetry* in the story of the conceptions of John and of Jesus: an angel tells Elisabeth that she is to have a child and an angel tells Mary the same thing (1: 5 ff. and 1: 26 ff.). Later in her book Butler writes, 'It will be noticed that the wicked magician did not scruple to perform one of the miracles suggested to Christ by Satan. He . . . bragged . . . that he could fling himself uninjured from lofty summits.'[88] Both stories, the story of Peter challenged by Simon and the story of Christ tempted in the wilderness, exhibit an element of deflection. Peter humbly refrains from any Simonian 'showing off' so that at first the reader fears disappointment: perhaps the competition is off; but then Peter, by invoking a power not his own, spectacularly shoots down Simon. Satan in the wilderness perhaps envisages an exciting scenario of competitive superhuman feats and is frustrated by Christ's refusal to play along. If we remember that Simon was Peter's original name, we can see the Magus momentarily as an evil *alter ego*, an antitype or mirror image of the saint. Christ and Satan meanwhile are mere opposites. It is interesting, however, that Satan is eagerly imagining not his own glory but a feat to be performed by his antagonist. He envisages a sequence which is never going to happen and, devilishly cunning as he is, presents the sequence as a temptation. Certainly Peter was tempted later by Simon's challenge and defeated his diabolical antagonist by a clear demonstration of the power of Christ, whose invoked name is enough to bring down the flying thaumaturge. Even in the

[87] *The Myth of the Magus*, p. 66.

[88] Ibid, p. 80.

Acts of Peter and Paul the sense of anti-magical spirituality is sustained (Peter scorns the godless display laid on by Simon)—but only just. Peter's anti-magic trembles on the brink of becoming counter-magic.

The strange story of the fig tree in the Gospels (Mark 11; Matthew 21: 19–20) has the atmosphere of primitive thaumaturgy we found surrounding the figures of Solomon, Virgil, Roger Bacon, and Abanus (to say nothing of Simon Magus himself). In Mark, probably the earliest of the four Gospels, we are told how Jesus, having entered Jerusalem in triumph, awakes next morning feeling hungry. Seeing a fig tree in the distance he decides, in spite of the fact that it is not yet the season for figs (11: 13), that he would like to taste the fruit. Remember here how Faustus, Marlowe's impresario of trivia, dispatches Mephistophilis to obtain grapes out of season for the pregnant Duchess of Vanholt (A text, IV. iii. 10–15). Jesus, finding the tree without fruit, curses it, making it barren for all time, and passes on. The following morning the fig tree is found to be withered (Mark 11: 13–21). Of course the story can be elevated by allegorical interpretation to high theological significance: Jesus may have performed an 'active parable', to show how those who bear no spiritual fruit (traditionally, the Jews) are lost. Meanwhile the note of sheer pettishness nags at the mind. It is oddly unfair to punish a tree for behaving in a thoroughly normal tree-like manner. When the story is re-told in Matthew, the reference to the fact that figs were out of season is suppressed. The swift translation of a subjective spasm of elementary bad temper into violently effective public action is characteristic of the old wonder-workers of legend. E. M. Butler saw this too.[89]

I have tried to show how *gnosis* could be transformed from transcendental knowledge to physical power, how a path leads from thaumaturgy through conjuring to natural science. The aspiring flight of the mind, seeking knowledge, is seen as wicked rebellion if the flight is made in defiance of the loving Father of Orthodoxy, as liberation if it is in defiance of the tyrant Creator of the Gnostics. The place of Satan in the scheme is fairly stable. He is the arch-rebel who leads Adam

[89] Ibid, p. 70.

and Eve to the tree of knowledge. It may be thought that Satan is hardly to be connected, in anyone's mind, with natural science, but H. Ainsworth in the seventeenth century did exactly this. Expounding the Hebrew word for 'subtle', applied to the serpent in Genesis, he wrote that it signified '*subtill observation*, *search* and *finding out by experience*'.[90] The place of Christ, on the other hand, is wildly unstable. The Ophite Gnostics and the Peratae, as we saw, may have gone as far as to identify Christ with the serpent of Genesis. In William Blake's astonishing pen and watercolour picture, *The Fall of Man*, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, Christ (not the angel Michael) leads Adam and Eve out of a Urizenic Paradise; in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake makes Jehovah the enemy of Christ.[91]

The atmosphere is heady—too heady. These men—aviators of the mind, air-heads—seem to be vanishing, in a hysteria of inverted categories. Did anything of this sort happen, not in myth, competitive blasphemy, and wild theology but in the ordinary realm of fact? Phaethon, Icarus, Simon Magus flew too high and were brought low. Of these the last is perhaps quasi-historical but no one now believes that he really flew and landed in the Via Sacra. An entirely historical person who actually flew and came down with a bump was one Eilmer, an eleventh-century monk.

The chronicler William of Malmesbury, writing only fifty or sixty years after the time of Eilmer, tells how Eilmer prophesied doom when he saw Halley's comet in 1066, just before the Norman invasion:

> A comet, a star foretelling, they say, change in Kingdoms, appeared trailing its long and fiery tail across the sky. Wherefore a certain monk of our monastery, Eilmer by name, bowed down with terror at the sight of the brilliant star, sagely cried, 'Thou art come. A cause of grief to many a mother art thou come; I have seen this before; but now I behold thee much more terrible, threatening to hurl destruction on this land'.[92]

[90] *Annotations on the V Books of Moses* (London: M. Parsons for John Bellamie, (1639), commentary on Book I, p. 14. [91] E, p. 35.

[92] Translation modified from that of J. A. Giles in William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, Book II, ch. xiii (London: Bohn's Antiquarian Library, 1847), pp. 251–2. The Latin text is in *Gesta Regium Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1887), vol. i, pp. 276–7.

We seem to be firmly in the world of marvels, prodigies, and prophecy, save perhaps for the words, 'I have seen this before'. Here astronomers prick up their ears. William tells us that Eilmer was very old in 1066. If he was in his early eighties he would have been, say, 5 in 989, the year of the previous appearance in our skies of Halley's comet. It is not quite impossible that a scientifically inclined intelligence might retain such a memory. But then, in any case, as William continues, the shift of interest to the mechanico-scientific becomes clear:

> In his early youth he had hazarded a deed of remarkable boldness. He had by some means, I scarcely know what, fastened wings to his hands and feet so that, mistaking fable for truth, he might fly like Daedalus, and, catching the breeze on the summit of a tower, he flew for more than the distance of a furlong [i.e. six or seven hundred feet]. But, agitated by the violence of the wind and the swirling of air, as well as by awareness of his rashness, he fell, broke his legs, and was lame ever after.

The Chronicler says 'mistaking fable for truth' (*fabulam pro vero amplexus*) where he might have said with greater force 'translating fable into truth', for it seems that Eilmer really did fly for a considerable distance. The tower in the story may remind some of Simon Magus's performance before Nero, but we shall do better to think of the real occasion when, as Suetonius tells us, an actor playing the part of Icarus fell to his death, bespattering the emperor (Nero again) with his blood.[93] Simon's was a case of defeated magic. The case of the actor, almost certainly, was a one of failed stage-machinery. Nevertheless the actor was obliged by the requirements of his profession to transpose myth into fact, as far as he was able. Eilmer, nearer to the actor than to Simon but nearer still to the modern aviator, was surely no failure at all. He broke his legs but he travelled a considerable distance and afterwards lived to a great age. In 1962 a re-enactment of Eilmer's flight was staged at Malmesbury. RAF Junior Technician Bernard Collins, aged 23, dressed as a monk, spread his artificial wings and launched himself from the abbey roof. But this, like the spectacle described by Suetonius, was once more theatre and not

93 *Nero*, xii, in *Suetonius*, with an English translation by J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1924), vol. ii, p. 104.

science. Junior Technician Collins made his flight suspended from a wire.[94]

William says that Eilmer was young when he flew from the tower. This places the event roughly in the period 1000 to 1010, in which case Eilmer's flight would have been contemporary with that of the Persian philological scholar, al-Jauhari who died when he tried to fly, with the aid of some sort of apparatus, from the roof of the old mosque of Nishapur in Khorosan.[95] It was a long time before anyone else did as well as Eilmer. Lynn White has doubts about the story of Giovanni Battista Danti of Perugia (he is said to have flown in a glider over Lake Trasimeno in the 1490s, but no account has been found earlier than 1648[96]), but White is inclined to believe the account of Giovanni Damiani (Dunbar's 'fenyeit Freir of Tungland'), who somehow made his way from Italy to the colder air of Galloway; there he leapt from the walls of Stirling castle wearing wings made of chicken feathers and fell like a stone, in October 1507.[97] Damiani survived but clearly did not match the flight path of Eilmer. In one version of Marco Polo's narrative of his journey to China in the thirteenth century we find an account of man-carrying kites, but this post-dates the flying monk of Malmesbury.[98] Eilmer remains the name to remember and honour.

Roger Bacon, whom we have met elsewhere, seems to have known about Eilmer and, characteristically, to have sought to overgo his example—at least in thought. He writes of flying-machines worked by an engine, and says he has never seen one

94 See M. S. Woosnam, *Eilmer, 11th Century Monk of Malmesbury: The Flight and the Comet* (Malmesbury: Friends of Malmesbury Abbey, 1986), p. 8.

95 See Lynn White, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 63–4; Ahmed Zeki, 'L'Aviation chez les Arabes', *Bulletin de l'Institut Égyptien*, 5th ser., 4 (1910), pp. 93–5. For the date, see C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, 2nd edn. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1943), vol. i, p. 133.

96 *Medieval Religion and Technology*, p. 68. White cites R. Hennig, 'Beiträge zur Frügeschichte der Aeronautik', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Technik und Industrie*, 8 (1918), p. 115, and 18 (1928), pp. 93–4.

97 White, *Medieval Religion and Technology*, p. 68.

98 *Description of the World*, ed A. C. Moore and P. Pelliot, with an introduction by A. C. Moule, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1938), vol. i, pp. 47–52. The passage occurs in a Latin translation only, extant in two MSS, the earlier being of the 15th cent.

but knows a man who designed one.[99] In the seventeenth century both Bishop Wilkins and John Milton praised Eilmer's achievement.[100] The most delicious element in the story of Eilmer remains to be told. After he hit the ground, according to the Chronicle, he said—what? That he had not prayed enough? No. He said, for all the world like some MIT 'nerd' of our own century, that his mistake had been not to attach a tail.[101]

I have appended the story of Eilmer as a breath of clear air, of unpretentious practicality after the vertiginous splendours of high Gnosticism. Here, it might be said, I betray my own naïve empiricism. For Eilmer had one precursor, Ibn Firnas, a polymathical physician who lived in Cordoba in the ninth century, who made himself wings, flew in a circle, and landed badly, hurting his back. He forgot, the Moroccan historian tells us, *to provide himself with a tail*.[102] The remark about the tail, it will be claimed, is not nature but art, a repetitive topos—not nature asserting itself but merely art of another colour. Perhaps. But if it is characteristic of science to repeat successful experiments, might not certain failures recur, not because they provide pleasing myths but because they crop up naturally? The Pomeranian Otto Lilienthal, whom White calls 'the effective father of modern aviation'[103] made his first glider in 1891. It had no tail—but he added one later.

Marlowe wrote his play in literary, un-painterly England. We may nevertheless see his drama as standing between two pictures, *St Peter and Simon Magus* by Benozzo Gozzoli, painted in the fifteenth century (Plate 1), and Rembrandt's etching, *Faustus*,

99 *De Secretis Operibus*, cap. 4, in *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita*, ed. J. S. Brewer, 3 vols. (London: Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores, 1859), vol. iii, p. 533. See also White, *Medieval Religion and Technology*, p. 68 and S. C. Easton, *Roger Bacon and his Search for Universal Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), p. 111.

100 White, *Medieval Religion and Technology*, pp. 69 and 67; J. Wilkins *Mathematicall Magick, or the Wonders that may be found by Mathematicall Geometrie* (London: printed by M. F. for S. Gellibrand, 1648), p.204; John Milton, *History of Britain*, vi, in *CPW*, vol. v (1971), pp. 394–5.

101 In Giles's translation of William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle*, p. 252; *Gesta*, ed. Stubbs, p. 277.

102 White, *Medieval Religion and Technology*, p. 62; Ahmad ibn al-Maqqari, *History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, Book II, ch. iii, trans. Pascual de Gayangos, 2 vols. (London: printed for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain, 1840–3), vol. i, p. 148.

103 *Medieval Religion and Technology*, p. 73.

probably made about 1652 (Plate 2). The Gozzoli is full of Quattrocento felicity: the colours are bright, the weather in the scene depicted looks perfect. The picture shows, within a single frame, Simon flying high above the court of Nero and Simon having fallen at the feet of the emperor, who sits, in golden armour, on the right. Even the blood flowing from the head of the fallen Simon is pretty; it trickles in, so to speak, a delightfully decorative manner. There is a certain Renaissance severity in the hard lines of the wall which surrounds the court, but the new lessons of perspective here illustrated are likewise, one senses, matter for joy ('O che dolce cosa questa perspettiva!').[104]

Rembrandt's picture[105] on the other hand is full of unappeased anxieties. Most of the room shown in the etching is in darkness; Faustus, if it is he, seems to have turned momentarily from his studies to look at a blazing cabbalistic emblem which has appeared before his window, the radiance of the emblem mingling with the natural light coming through the panes. We are not quite certain whether the circle in which the cabbalistic writing appears is a roundel physically mounted in the window or a supernatural imposition. Faustus is not looking directly at the spectacle. A shadowy body, we slowly realize, is growing upward and outward from his half-turned torso and is pointing with its hand to the reflection of the vision in a hinged circular pane(?) which swings out towards the viewer. It is at this that Faustus is staring. Where the Gozzoli drawing is unfalteringly clear, Rembrandt's lines are edgy, broken, tense.

I have said 'Faustus, if it is he', and indeed there is some doubt. The title 'Faustus"or 'Dr Faustus' is not found until the 1730s.[106] Gersaint in his catalogue of 1751 gives 'Dr Fautricus', this form of the name deriving from a mid-seventeenth century Dutch adaptation of Marlowe's play.[107] Christopher White and

104 'Oh, what a sweet thing this perspective is!' When Paolo Uccello's wife called to him to come to bed, this was his reply from his study. See Giorgio Vasari, *Vite de' piu' eccellente pittori, scultori ed architetti*, 16 vols. (Milan: Classici Italiani, 1807–11), vol. iv, p. 108.

105 B270 according to the numbering of the Bartasch Catalogue.

106 In Valerius Röver's inventory of 1730, in the Huls sale catalogue of 1735; see Christopher White and Karel G. Boon, *Rembrandt's Etchings: An Illustrated Catalogue*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Van Gendt, 1969), vol. ii, p. 124.

107 See the catalogue *Rembrandt: Eaux-fortes*, Museé de Petit Palais, 6 Feb. 1986 (Paris: Dutuit, 1986), no page numbers.

Karel G. Boon suggest that we may have a different, earlier title, if this picture is to be identified with *The Alchemist at his Work* in Clement de Jonghe's inventory of 1679.[108] Bevers, Schatborn, and Weltzel are emphatic, however, that the picture shows not an alchemist (who would have about him retorts, scientific instruments, and the like) but a scholar among his books.[109] We cannot be certain, but this seems indeed to be either a picture of Faustus himself or else (what is the next best thing for our purpose) a picture of a scholar concerned with astrology, confronted by a magical apparition (the obvious example of this in everyone's mind would of course have been Dr Faustus). Wolfgang Wegner has pointed to the similarities in Rembrandt's etching to the engraved title-page of a book on magical practices published in 1651.[110] Bevers, Schatborn, and Weltzel, however, reject the idea of any allusion to the Dutch adaptation of *Dr Faustus* on the ground that the known illustrations of the Faust legend normally show the Devil.[111]

But we have seen enough of Gnosticism to know that this is not the clinching argument it appears to be. One short answer might be to point to the dim shapes which emerge in the vigorous, almost black cross-hatching below the oval form of the mirror. The Rijksmuseum has four versions of this etching—that is, four separate stages (an etcher can make a fairly simple design, print off the result, and then add more lines, more shading, sometimes completely obscuring earlier shapes, and print off again). In the etching bearing the Rijksmuseum number B. 270. I (H260I) one can discern, in the lower part of the curtain to the right of the window, a knotty form suggesting something coiled round a tree-trunk—the ordinary iconography for Satan when he tempted Adam and Eve to eat the apple of forbidden knowledge. The serpentine climbing form and the spiritual body of the scholar issuing from his own flesh both conduct us to a radiance—the kind of sunburst normally associated in Rembrandt's etchings with the revelation of

[108] *Rembrandt's Etchings: An Illustrated Catalogue*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Van Gendt, 1969), vol. ii, p. 104.

[109] Hahn Bevers, Peter Schatborn, and Barbara Weltzel, *Rembrandt: The Master and his Workshop* (New Haven:Yale University Press, 1991), p. 258.

[110] *Die Faustdarstellung vom 16 Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Amsterdam: Safaho Monographien, 1962).

[111] *Rembrandt*, p. 258.

divine truth.[112] The eye is led upwards to a second (left) hand steadying the hinged window pane. This hand, however, could as easily belong to the body which seems to issue from the lower abdomen of Faustus. Finally, it must be said that there are faint hints in the drawing of a second body, placed centrally, to which both hands may conceivably belong (see the 'enhanced' version, Plate 3). We are clearly confronted with a severe case of graphic ambiguity. If literary scholars are positively encouraged to smell out undermeanings and half-thoughts in the writings of poets, why should not art historians be willing to pursue similar hints and nuances in drawings? The mere act of shading a large area can permit a kind of free association of the hand, from which unexpected shapes can emerge. I know, because I have asked people, that not everyone sees the serpentine form I see in the shaded area. Moreover, the convolved, snaky shape does not traceably and consistently entwine the 'trunk'. It is evident, however, that the curtain to the right of the picture (where the problematic shape appears) is drawn in quite a different way from the curtain to the left. What seems to be entirely clear is the fact that the inscription in the circle contains a simultaneous reference to occult, forbidden magic and to Christ. It is likely that the letters, 'ALGA' in the outer circle are an acronym of 'Adonai Leolam Godol Aieth', 'Great forever is the Lord' (the same acronym, in a different order, appears in the Ghent altar-piece by the brothers Van Eyck).[113] Meanwhile the letters INRI, in the centre, can be seen prominently displayed in almost every church in Christendom: *Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews', the legend affixed to the cross with whatever mixture of irony and admiration by Pilate (John 19: 19) and afterwards endlessly repeated in pure reverence by Christians. Faustus's mirror shows him, not a tempter-devil, but the tortured, regal Christ.

[112] Light radiates from the centrally placed head of Christ in *Christ at Emmaus* (B. 87. I). Closely analogous to *Faustus* is *Jerome in a Dark Chamber* (B. 105. II), where the saint–scholar is staring at a crucifix in a window. Here all the light is natural, issuing from the window, while none comes from the crucifix itself. But in *The Virgin and Child with the Cat* (B. 63. I.) light radiates from the head of the Virgin *in front of* the window.

[113] See Owen S. Rachleff, *The Occult in Art* (London: Cromwell Editions, 1990), p. 98.

In his *The Masks of God* Joseph Campbell shows a German gold Thaler of the sixteenth century; on one side we have Christ on the cross; on the other a second cross, but this time a serpent's folds entwine the tree; the second image is a clear visual echo of the first.[114] Campbell observes that the coin is certainly susceptible of a wholly orthodox interpretation. The reference is to the story in Numbers 21 of the Israelites who complain of hunger and thirst: Jahweh, incensed by their complaints, sends fiery serpents to bite them; at this the Israelites repent and ask Moses to intercede for them; Moses prays to Jahweh and Jahweh tells him to make a brazen serpent; whoever looks at the brazen serpent will survive snake-bite. In St John's Gospel the story is applied to Christ: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life' (3: 14–15). Campbell writes, 'The approved Christian allegory is simply that, as the serpent of bronze lifted up by Moses on a staff countervailed the poison of a plague of serpents, so the lifting up of Jesus on the cross countervailed the poison of the serpent of the Garden.'[115] But Campbell is not entirely happy with this. He goes on to argue that, given a context of Renaissance Gnosticism, there could be a suggestion that the serpent is a form of Christ, or that both are manifestations of some deeper power. In any case, the 'orthodox story' is itself far from perspicuous. The making of the brazen serpent by Moses comes after the command, given on Mount Sinai, to make no graven images. It is as if, suddenly, Jahweh is commanding Moses to sin. The brazen serpent was still being venerated in the Temple at Jerusalem in the time of the good king Hezekiah (about 725 BC), 'for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan' 2 Kings 18: 4). Hezekiah, in an act of wholly pious iconoclasm, smashes the image of the serpent. It is as if, wherever one looks, ambiguity gathers strength. Even in the original account in Numbers of the plague sent by Jahweh the serpents are not simply serpents. Walter Eichrodt has pointed out that they are *nahas sarap*, that is '*seraph* serpents'.[116]

[114] 4 vols. (London: Secker & Warburg), vol. iv, p. 153.
[115] Ibid., p. 154.
[116] *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Baker, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1985), vol. ii, p. 204.

Both parties in the sixteenth century, optimistic Hermetists and pessimistic Calvinists, avail themselves of the image of the mirror. Cornelius Agrippa wrote in a kind of Gnostic ecstasy,

> Therefore our mind being pure and divine, inflamed with religious love adorned with hope directed by faith, placed in the height and top of the humane soul, doth attract the truth, and sudainly comprehend it, & beholdeth all the stations, grounds, causes and sciences of things both natural and immortal in the divine truth itself as it were in a certain glass of Eternity. Hence it comes to pass that we, though Natural, know those things which are above nature, and understand all things below . . . [117]

I have given Agrippa's words so far in the seventeenth-century English of 'J.F.', his first translator. I will continue in my own modern English.

> . . . thence, placed though we are within the world of nature, it comes to us sometimes to exercise dominion over nature and to accomplish feats so marvellous, so sudden, so difficult, by which ghosts may become obedient, the stars be disturbed, the gods compelled, the elements brought into subjection. So men devoted to God, and elevated by these theological virtues, rule the elements, drive away mists, summon winds, collect clouds into rain, cure diseases, raise the dead . . . [118]

We have now come to words we have already had occasion to quote. Even as he hurtles upward 'in the zodiac of his own wit' Agrippa makes it clear that the knowledge he prizes is not exclusively transcendental, is partly natural. The swift translation of knowledge into power is genuinely prophetic, it foreshadows the later history of science. But at the same time it has a touch of lunacy about it. We may think of the mad astronomer in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* who thinks that because he understands the motions of stars and clouds he can control the weather. Marlowe himself seems uncannily to have divined that even as this promise of power attained fulfilment it would issue in a kind of triviality or littleness. Notoriously Faustus, having attained power, is reduced. Here too we might smell real prophecy. Today, at the touch of a button we can

[117] Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, III. vi, (London edn.), p. 357.
[118] Latin text in *Henrici Cornelii Agrippae Opera*, (Lyons edn.), vol. i, p. 256; ed. Popkin, vol. i, p. 321.

summon a thousand twangling instruments or call up Helen's beauty, and the world seems smaller than ever.

Calvinist Fulke Greville, on the other hand, gives us another mirror.

> Downe in the depth of mine iniquity,
> That ugly centre of infernal spirits;
> Where each sinne feeles her own deformity,
> In those peculiar torments she inherits,
> Depriv'd of humane graces and divine,
> Even there appears this *saving God* of mine,
>
> And in this fatal mirrour of transgression
> Shews man as fruit of his degeneration,
> The errours ugly infinite impression,
> Which bears the faithless downe to desperation;
> Depriv'd of humane graces and divine
> Even there appears this *saving God* of mine.[119]

We are in that strange area of Protestant thought where despair borders upon joy and confidence. We saw earlier how, in the words of Susan Snyder, despair for Protestants such as Luther lay at the heart of the Christian experience, and also how, with the rejection of the Pelagian idea that one could *earn* a place in heaven, there came a bizarre, inverse comfort: God may not reward human virtue (which is at its highest a thing of rags and tatters) but Grace works naturally and readily upon corruption—and of that we have plenty. 'Let no man flatter himself', wrote Augustine, 'Of himself he is Satan . . . For what do you have of your own but sin?'[120] The good reader of seventeenth-century poetry spots that John Donne is actually beginning to cheer up when he writes the last line of his first Divine Meditation: 'And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.' Fulke Greville sees in his glass neither divine truths nor ways of mastering natural forces; instead he sees his own depravity, but then, as we watch, the face of sin becomes the saving face of Christ.

Can we say, then, in the words of William Blake (echoing

[119] *Caelica*, xcix, in *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1939), vol. i, p. 144.

[120] *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, xlix. xl. 8, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xxxv, p. 1750.

2 Corinthians 11: 14), 'Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light'?[121] Not quite. In neither the Agrippa passage nor the Fulke Greville do we have the Serpent–Christ of Ophite Gnosticism, the enemy of the Creator (who can, I think, be glimpsed in Marlowe's play). But we do have, already, a frightening instability: what one will see as devilish presumption another will see as rebirth into divine knowledge. More mysteriously, corruption itself can be offered as a means of salvation. If Rembrandt, living in such times, had indeed seen—or heard talk of—the Dutch *Faustus* performed the year before he made his etching, is it not conceivable that he felt moved to change the expected figure of Faustus's tempter, Satan, into Christ? I cannot answer my own question, but a nightmare confusion of the extremes of good and evil is present, I submit, in the etching. *Dr Faustus* is a perfect title for it.

What then of Gozzoli's happy, pretty picture? In a way its very tranquillity is, in the long run, more disturbing than the explicit *angoisse* of the Rembrandt. For Gozzoli, who obviously knew that he was painting the enemy of God, has, without fuss or special emphasis, chosen to depict him, in that blue Italian sky, exactly as other Quattrocento artists depicted Christ or Mary: the bodily posture, the attitude of benediction, the placing of the figure in the upper centre of the composition, the untroubled, extraordinary sexless beauty—all, as it were, singing the wrong tune.

[121] Words inscribed by Blake in his illustration, 'With dreams upon my bed . . .', fascicule 12, plate 11, in *William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job*, ed. David Bindman *et al.* (London: The William Blake Trust, 1987).

III
Milton

(i) Satan's Shield

Milton, long thought to be England's second-greatest poet, author of the principal English justification of God the Creator, systematic misogynist, classicist, Puritan—this figure needs to be approached with care. He presents himself in *De Doctrina Christiana,* at some personal danger perhaps (though this work was not published in his lifetime), as an Arian heretic, that is, far from exalting the Son above the Father, as earlier figures in this book have done, he violently reverses the picture; he erases the egalitarian orthodox Trinity and exalts the Father above the Son.[1] His account of the sin of Adam and Eve is unequivocally condemnatory:

> Anyone who examines the sin carefully will admit, and rightly, that it was a most atrocious offence, and that it broke every part of the law. For what fault is there which man did not commit in committing this sin? He was to be condemned both for trusting Satan and for not trusting God; he was faithless, ungrateful, disobedient, greedy, uxorious; she, negligent of her husband's welfare; both of them committed theft, robbery with violence, murder against their children (i.e. the whole human race); each was sacrilegious and deceitful, cunningly aspiring to divinity although thoroughly unworthy of it, proud and arrogant.[2]

[1] See esp. *De Doctrina Christiana* (hereafter *DDC*), I. v, in John Carey's translation, in *CPW*, vol. vi (1973), pp. 205 ff. In all that follows I assume that Milton is the author of *DDC*. This was accepted by everyone until William B. Hunter questioned Milton's authorship in two articles, 'The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*' and 'The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*: Addenda from the Bishop of Salisbury', *Studies in English Literature*, 32 (1992), pp. 129–42, and 33 (1993), pp. 191–207. Hunter's arguments have been effectively countered by Maurice Kelley, 'The Provenance of John Milton's *Christian Doctrine*', *Studies in English Literature*, 34 (1994), pp. 153–63, and Christopher Hill, 'Professor William B. Hunter, Bishop Burgess and John Milton', *Studies in English Literature*, 34 (1994), pp. 165–93.

[2] *DDC* I. xi, pp. 383–4.

The passage is nothing if not clear, yet there is a sense in it of a kind of hyperbole of reason which may remind us of Blake. When Blake offered the demonstration, with which this book began, of his claim that Christ broke all of the Ten Commandments, he argued that Jesus murdered all those who afterwards died for his cause; we feel both strain and a peculiar cogency in the sentence. Milton says that Adam and Eve murdered all the human race which came after them. The combination of cogency and strain is evident here also. The very cadence of Milton's sentence is like Blake's, although of course Blake cannot have read the *De Doctrina Christiana,* which remained unpublished until 1825. Blake's sentence is consciously paradoxical, ostentatiously heretical, while Milton is here resolutely orthodox. But the element of sheer logical force is perhaps, against all expectation, stronger in Blake than in Milton. Those who would charge persons with murders which happened after their deaths will find that the charge stands up better when it is applied to one who is timelessly omniscient and omnipotent than it does when it is applied to persons whose knowledge and power is limited. Gnosticism is momentarily evoked in Milton's paragraph, only to be scotched at once: 'aspiring to divinity' is followed immediately by 'although thoroughly unworthy of it'. Did Milton forget, as he wrote so briskly, that in Genesis God himself acknowledged that Adam, having eaten from the tree, had become 'as one of us, to know good and evil' (3: 22)?

If, as seems likely, the *De Doctrina Christiana* was written between 1655 and 1660[3] the case for linking it with *Paradise Lost* is strong. Milton showed his nephew a draft of lines which were to form part of Book IV of the epic as early as 1642, but he seems to have settled down to serious work on the poem in 1660. What more natural then, than to turn to the prose treatise as a key to the thought of the poem?

For those who believe that prose writings tell us what the author really thought while poetry gives us only the author's mind at play, the authority of *De Doctrina Christiana* over *Paradise Lost* will be automatic. But if we think of our own century and of Yeats's prose work, *A Vision* and then set that

3 See *CPW*, vol. vi, pp. 22–3.

against the infinitely more intelligent, subtler poem 'The Second Coming', we may feel less sure of our initial presumption. It will be said that the prose of Milton is an altogether weightier affair than the prose of Yeats. Even so, here too the obvious public commitment of the writing may have entailed a filtering out of troublesome complexities. Such complexities survive, meanwhile, in the poetry. I propose therefore at this point to move laterally to enter Milton's theology by the side-door(?) of his poetry. If I seem to digress I do so in order to engage at last in a different manner with the principal matter at issue: the goodness or otherwise of the Creator, the wickedness or otherwise of Adam and Eve in eating from the tree of knowledge.

Marlowe took us into the world of intellectual flight, of science and magic, of the forbidden knowledge of Faustus. In a simile in the first book of *Paradise Lost* Milton allows us a glimpse of the condemned astronomer Galileo, gazing from his tower in Fiesole, flying in thought through the heavens. The simile is embedded in a description of Satan, newly fallen (the lesser devil, Beelzebub, has just finished speaking):

> He scarce had ceased when the superior fiend
> Was moving toward the shore; his ponderous shield
> Ethereal temper, massy, large, and round,
> Behind him cast; the broad circumference
> Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb
> Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views
> At evening from the top of Fesole,
> Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,
> Rivers or mountains in her spotty globe.
>
> (i. 283–91)

Let us begin by asking a purely literary, formal question: what kind of simile is this? More than sixty years ago James Whaler pointed out that while Homer, the father of written epic, offered similes which turn on a single point of reference, his Roman successor, Virgil, preferred the 'homologated' simile, that is, the kind of simile which turns out to be multiply relevant to the person or thing described, to act as a kind of mirror. At first sight this looks like a way of saying how much better Virgil is than Homer; the Greek poet digresses wantonly, the Roman maintains a complex, highly charged coherence,

enforcing his main meaning even as he appears to depart from it. But let us listen to each poet.

I will reverse chronological order and give a Virgilian simile first: the comparison of the walk taken in the underworld of the dead by Aeneas and the Sibyl with a woodland path, followed by fitful moonlight:

> Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram
> perque domos Ditis uacuas et inania regna:
> quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna
> est iter in silvis, ubi caelum condidit umbra
> Iuppiter, et rebus nox abstulit atra colorem[4]
>
> (*Aeneid*, vi. 268. 72)

I will translate as literally as I can:

> They were walking on, darkened under the lonely night through the shade and through the vacant halls of Dis and the empty realms, just as through an uncertain moon under a grudging light a way lies, when Jupiter has buried the sky in shadow and black night has deprived things of their colour.

Here *ibant*, 'they were walking' is answered in the simile by *est iter*, 'a way lies'; Dis, the god of the underworld, corresponds to Jupiter, the god of the sky; *sola sub nocte*, 'under a lonely night' is answered by *sub luce maligna*, 'under a grudging light' and *umbra*, 'shade' or 'shadow', appears on both sides. David West offers the passage as a strong example of the Virgilian simile in his essay 'Multiple Correspondences in the *Aeneid*'.[5]

Here, for contrast, is Homer (I give the archaic but closely literal translation by Lang, Leaf, and Myers):

> So these twain shouted in front, and aroused the battle of the Achaeans. But as flakes of snow fall thick on a winter day, when Zeus the Counsellor hath begun to snow, showing forth these arrows of his to men, and he hath lulled the winds, and he snoweth continually, till he hath covered the crests of the high hills, and the uttermost headlands, and the grassy plains, and rich tillage of men; and the snow is scattered over the havens and shores of the grey sea, and only the wave as it rolleth in keeps off the snow, but all other things are

4 Text of *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford Classical Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 235.

5 *Journal of Roman Studies*, 59 (1969), pp. 40–9, at p. 46.

swathed over, when the shower of Zeus cometh heavily, so from both sides their stones flew thick, some towards the Trojans, and some from the Trojans, and some from the Trojans against the Achaeans, while both sides were smitten, and over all the wall the din arose. (*Iliad*, xii. 276–89)[6]

The stones thrown, it might be said, are like snowflakes in their number, and in nothing else. The rest is mere digression. The very grammar is not syntactic, that is, organized into main and subordinate clauses, but is instead loosely paratactic—'and . . . and . . . and'—as afterthought is added to afterthought in a merely serial manner. Virgil's lines conversely are tightly syntactic. The mind of the Latin poet, moreover, stays with his darkened travellers; Homer leaves the terrible battlefield for a timeless, snowy world.

The very excursiveness—one can almost say the very irrelevance—of Homer's simile gives it the character of a window unexpectedly appearing in the wall of a long corridor, or of an inhalation of air. Suddenly, by momentary contrast, as the ordinary continuities of life are admitted to the poem, the great war fought round the walls of Troy is felt as a suffocating enclosure. Long poems need to give their readers rests, holidays. Also, in an utterly elementary fashion, a simile must offer *some* degree of difference or it would not be a simile at all. Those who think the principle is clear: 'The greater the degree of homologation, the better the poetry', should pause to reflect that perfect homologation would entail mere repetition of the initial description, would entail the abolition of the comparison. Virgil's likening of the obscure journey to a path ill lit by the moon, is in danger, by the very strength of its homologation, of ceasing to be a simile at all, 'so just, so like tautology'[7] it falls.

This poignancy of difference, never quite amounting to explicit contrast, in Homer's simile makes the softness of the snow strangely moving after the hardness of spears and (as we are told at the end) stones. The silence of snow refuses to homologate with the din of battle. Instead, it heals it. A blind

[6] In *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers (1st pub. 1882; Globe edn., London: Macmillan, 1914), pp. 238–9.

[7] John Dryden, *Mac Flecknoe*, 56, in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), vol. i.

student I once taught, arriving late for a tutorial on a snowy day, said lightly, 'Snow is a blind man's fog.' She meant that all the varying noises, the differently echoing footfalls so informative to the ears of the blind were erased. But we who are reading of the war almost wish for such blindness and deafness. The snow muffles and erases form after form, defeated only by the grey sea, itself formless. Yet within this merciful poetry of respite there is a hint, after all, of homologation, of pain answering pain. Snow can kill through cold. Snowflakes, the pale 'arrows' of Zeus, are after all real arrows, of another kind.

I am aware that any argument about the rival elements of Homer and Virgil will vary according to the examples chosen from either poet. I am sure that I could find cases where I would myself prefer the homologated to the digressive simile; here my argument is simply designed to show that the digressive simile is not necessarily the weaker, poetically. Although careful criticism may again and again detect elements of homologation in Homeric similes,[8] our basic sense that Homer is the digressive poet and Virgil the homologator, stands.

What then should we say of the Miltonic simile with which we began, the comparison of Satan's shield with the moon, seen by the Italian astronomer? Is this homologated or digressive? Formally and also fundamentally it is digressive. The shield as it gleams becomes a window through which we pass, leaving the Enemy of Mankind stalking over the burning marl (i. 296) for the valley of the Arno, where the star-watcher gazes through a very seventeenth-century telescope at the moon, hanging in the Italian sky.

Yet we do not feel as if we have escaped completely. This is partly because, while Homer works with a sustaining clarity even when he sings of snow and sea, Milton from the first undermines our certainties. In the opening line the word 'superior' is likely to be experienced today as a minor irritant (we may think of 'superior' hotels or 'superior' accents). But Milton is writing with care. He wants this alien, polysyllabic, teetering tower of a word to create a minor suspension near the end of the first line, so that we then experience the strange

[8] See Charles Martindale, *John Milton and the Transformation of Ancient Epic* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 119–20.

imperfect tense, 'was moving', as a fresh surprise: this huge structure is on legs, can walk (we are told at i. 591 that Satan 'stood like a tower'). Compare Craig Raine's remark about Matthew Arnold's description of the river Oxus as 'foiled, circuitous wanderer'—'How much less roundabout the Oxus would be, how much less intricately complicated, if you substituted "roundabout" for "circuitous".' More importantly, Milton plays off the classical quasi-abstraction of 'superior' against the juxtaposed concreteness of the Saxon monosyllable, 'fiend'.

This is an old game, available in English, unavailable (as I understand it) in French. We are often able to choose between immigrant Latin (or Greek) and native English. English-speakers feel at once the difference between 'compress' and 'squeeze', 'latent' and 'lurking'. Some believe that it is always the Saxon term which carries the power, but good poets know that is not true. Consider the effect of Blake's admission of a remote polysyllable in the line, 'Could frame thy fearful symmetry' ('The Tyger').

We come next to the shield. Is it heavy and hard or is it somehow insubstantial? Both, the poetry tells us, as it follows 'ponderous' with 'ethereal temper'—that is, hammered from skyey textures in some starry smithy. Here I suspect, though I cannot prove, that Milton remembered a passage from Plutarch's dialogue on the face we see in the moon. Plutarch speaks of Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods, and within a couple of lines we meet the words, *hupo tou puros exaitherotheis*, 'etherealized by the fire'.[9] Satan's shield grows metallically heavy again with 'massy' but then the faint conceptual oxymoron of a *circumference*—a mathematical universal—hanging physically from a strap propels us in the direction of geometry, of insubstantial abstraction.

In Plutarch's book on the face we see in the moon, the 'I' of the dialogue says that Clearchus believed that the spots we see in the moon are a reflection of our own terrestrial seas—that the moon is a giant mirror. At this point Plutarch quotes a

9 In Plutarch, *Moralia*, 922B, Loeb Classical Library, 15 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1927–69), vol. xii, with an English translation by H. Cherniss and W. C. Helmbold, p. 50.

marvellous line of poetry which comes from the lost poem, the *Phainomena* of Agesianax,

> e pontou mega kuma katantia kumainontos
> deikelon indalloito puriphlegethontos esoptrou
>
> The sea's great wave in answering surge
> Appears, an image in a glass of fire[10]

Plutarch's moon is offered, for a moment at least in the dialogue, as a mirror. It is, therefore a cosmic simile hanging in the sky, its stains corresponding to the blemishes of the earth, a simile which was not made by a human poet, *an objective homologation of our own world*. Yet Milton's moon I have described as digressive, an excursion, almost a truancy, from the matter of the poem. Perhaps we should imitate Galileo and apply a lens to this passage.

I have hinted that the disquieting movement to and fro between the substantial and the insubstantial weakens the hard Homeric division between immediate terror and the timeless continuities of the simile-world. Moreover 'the Tuscan artist' is himself no timeless continuity but a precise historical individual. We have not yet finished, however, with the language of the simile, for the most startling thing, the shock-word, is still to be noticed. The word is 'spotty', in the line, 'rivers or mountains in her spotty globe'.

The word is low, almost brutal. The moon, the silver, chaste huntress, Diana of the skies, is degraded and stained. Marjorie Nicolson thought that Milton probably looked through a telescope at the time of his visit to Italy[11]. If he did he may well have been both excited and shocked by the scarred, blotchy spectacle which confronted him (remember that an astronomer with a telescope is already present, in our simile). 'Optic glass', with its gross contemporaneity, already sticks out from the noble texture of the verse, as we say, like a sore thumb and

[10] *Moralia*, 921B, ibid., vol. xii, p. 42. The suggestion in Plutarch that the moon is a mirror of the earth may be set beside the passage in Lucian's 'True Story' (1st cent. AD), in which certain persons who make a voyage to the moon are there shown a curious glass in which the cities and countries of the earth are minutely reflected; Lucian, I. xxvi, with an English translation by A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library, 8 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1961–7), vol. i, p. 280.

[11] 'Milton and the Telescope', in her *Science and Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Great Seal Books, 1956), pp. 80–109.

softens up the reader for the greater violence of 'spotty' soon to follow. In Donne's 'Valediction Forbidding Mourning' and in a hundred other places the moon is the cosmological point at which change and decay give place to eternal spirit. But Milton's moon does not austerely rebuke the imperfections of earth; instead, like the moon of Clearchus, it mirrors them, answering stain with stain. We have seen the mirror of Rembrandt's *Faustus*, of Agrippa, of Fulke Greville. Milton's, surely, is the most wonderful of them all. This moon has fallen. 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!' (Isaiah 14: 12). Lucifer is one of the names of Satan, but 'Lucifer' also meant 'light-bearer'. This is a poem about falling, first the fall of Satan, then the fall of Adam and Eve. The moon is blotched but still silvery. Satan, the fallen angel, is similarly leprous-luminous:

> his form had not yet lost
> All her original brightness, nor appeared
> Less than archangel ruined . . .
>
> (i. 591–3)

Here too Milton invokes the moon, transformed this time not by blemishes but as an effect of cosmological eclipse, as the moon itself now blocks the light of the sun;

> from behind the moon
> In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
>
> (i. 596–7)

Our growing sense of an imaginative identification of Satan with the moon is strengthened at iii. 590 where Satan lands on the sun, creating an obscuring blot, as the moon did at i. 597. Here fascinatingly the image-cluster of the shield simile is revived. Milton begins to write, not only of sun-spots, but once more of a certain Italian astronomer and his 'optic tube'. Homologation of a kind, it would seem, is gathering strength.

The word 'spotty' shocks and yet one can see, with the naked eye, that the moon is not immaculate. Long before telescopes were invented Plutarch, as we saw, wrote a whole book about the spots on the moon and I believe this book was in Milton's mind. But the telescope, so to speak, rubbed people's noses in undesirable matter, made them stare hard at something they

preferred not to see. To be sure there are pre-echoes of the Miltonic subversion. Commentaries refer the reader to Spenser's comparison of Radigund's shield with the moon in *The Faerie Queene* (V. v. 3); but there the moon is allowed to shine with unimpaired brilliance. More deeply relevant is the Proem to Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, where Spenser has the extraordinary idea, centuries before H. G. Wells's *First Men in the Moon*, that the moon might not be solid, might contain other worlds. It used to be said that Milton was the first English poet to express Pascal's horror at these *espaces infinis*, but Richard McCabe rightly finds the same fear (heavily disguised by Spenser's style) in the Bruno-esque, multiple-world tenor of the Proem to Book II.[12]

There is a subtler and more intricately structured analogy with Shakespeare, with the 'pale fire' speech in *Timon of Athens*: 'Her pale fire she filches from the sun' (IV. iii. 441). Here Tillyard's Elizabethan world picture of glorious reciprocity and hierarchy is subjected to a sick parody: the moon does not serve the sun; instead she steals his fire. But, if we can compare the newly material moon of the astronomers with the ancient fall from heaven of Lucifer, may we not also ask, 'Who else stole fire?' The answer of course is Prometheus, who was thereafter nailed to a rock by the tyrant god. *Paradise Lost* is full of Greek myths but this one is absent (though there is a reference to Pandora, the sister-in-law of Prometheus). Some think that Milton did not so much neglect the myth as repress it. Certainly Blake and Shelley had no difficulty in finding the unnamed Prometheus everywhere in the poem.

Milton probably read Galileo's *Sidereus Nuntius* ('Starry Messenger'), published in Venice in 1610. In this book the Italian astronomer speculates on the mountain ranges which must be there on the surface of the moon, to cast the shadows which are so clearly visible to any one looking through a telescope. He casually observes (and this sentence especially got him into great trouble later) that a certain part of the moon's surface looks very like our own terrestrial Bohemia. Milton, even as he affronts the dominant tradition of the poets and

[12] *The Pillars of Eternity: Truth and Providence in The Faerie Queene* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), pp. 232–3.

defers to the dangerous New Science, can join hands with Orpheus, the first poet, who according to John Wilkins in *The Discovery of a World in the Moon* said that the moon *polla orea echei, poll'astea, polla melathra*, 'has many mountains, many cities, many halls'.[13] Wilkins himself is strong on the possibility that there may be rivers and mountains on the moon. He wonders whether the lunar inhabitants are 'the seed of Adam' and 'whether they are there in a blessed estate',[14] that is, still unfallen. Tommaso Campanella in his *Defence of Galileo*, first published at Frankfurt in 1622, wrote, 'If the inhabitants which may be in other stars are men, they did not originate from Adam and are not infected by his sin.'[15] Campanella observes that Galileo 'demonstrates the existence of mountains on the moon',[16] and also speaks of 'waters and mountains and other things within the stars',[17] but rejects the notion that the earthly Paradise is 'near the moon'.[18] Wilkins toys with the idea that Paradise was not on an earthly mountain but was on the moon[19] though, a little before, he favours the notion that 'the inhabitants of that world, are not men as we are, but some other kind of creatures which bear some proportion to our natures'.[20] In Campanella and Wilkins we find the idea of the new astronomy, of alternative worlds with their own rivers and mountains, of Adam and Eve and the Fall,

[13] See Stillman Drake's translation and note in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 36, and Wilkins, *The Discovery of a World in the Moon* (London: printed by E. G. for Michael Sparke, 1638), p. 80. Wilkins cites Plutarch 'de plac. phil., l.2, c.13'. I cannot find the passage at this point in *De Placitis Philosophorum*. But at II. 25, 891C of *De Placitis* there is a passage which is closer still to Milton's phrasing, the claim that, according to Anaxagoras and Democritus, the moon has *pedia kai ore kai pharaggas*, 'plains and mountains and ravines'. This work is not included in the Loeb Classical Library Plutarch. See Plutarch, *Œuvres morales*, 12 vols. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1887–1930, vol. xii b, *Opinions des philosophes*, text and French translation by Guy Lachenaud, 1893), p. 120. John Donne, responding swiftly to *Sidereus Nuntius* in 1610, has Lucifer say that he will write to the Pope: 'He shall call *Galilaeo* the *Florentine* to him, who by this time hath thoroughly instructed himselfe of all the hills, woods and Cities in the new world, the Moone': *Ignatius His Conclave*, ed. T. S. Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 81.

[14] *The Discovery of a World in the Moon*, p. 186.

[15] Trans. Grant McColley, Smith College Studies in History (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1937), p. 66.

[16] Ibid., p. 64.

[17] Ibid., p. 65.

[18] Ibid., p. 38.

[19] *The Discovery of a World in the Moon*, pp. 205–6.

[20] Ibid., pp. 192–3.

all linked to the moon not very long before Milton first struck out his great simile, likening the shield of Satan to the tainted moon.

The violence of Milton's epithet, 'spotty', remains. Shakespeare writes again and again of the bright perfection of the silver moon (*Love's Labour's Lost*, IV. iii. 30), 'the moon like a silver bow | New-bent in heaven' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1. i. 10); 'The moon shines bright. On such a night as this . . .' (*The Merchant of Venice*, V. i. 1). Sometimes indeed his moon is pale, as in *1 Henry IV*, 1. iii. 202, but we shall look in vain in Shakespeare for the Miltonic lunar acne (I deliberately choose the most jarring word I can find).

What meanwhile of 'the Tuscan artist'? We know his name. This is Galileo, the Galileo Campanella defended, the Galileo of whom Milton wrote in *Areopagitica* 'There it was that I visited the famous Galileo grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought' (*CPW*, vol. ii, p. 538). Samuel Rogers, looking back from the early nineteenth century, described this meeting.

> There, unseen,
> In manly beauty, Milton stood before him
> Gazing with reverent awe—Milton, his guest,
> Just then come forth, all life and enterprise;
> He in his old age and extremity
> Blind at noon-day exploring with his staff;
> His eyes upturned as to the golden sun,
> His eye-balls idly rolling. Little then
> Did Galileo think whom he received;
> That in his hand he held the hand of one
> Who could requite him—who would spread his name
> O'er lands and seas—great as himself, nay greater;
> Milton as little that in him he saw,
> As in a glass, what he himself should be,
> Destined so soon to fall on evil days
> And evil tongues—so soon, alas, to live
> In darkness and with dangers compassed round
> And solitude.[21]

[21] 'The Campagna of Florence', in *Italy* (1822–8), in *The Poetical Works of Samuel Rogers*, ed. E. Bell (London: George Bell, 1875), pp. 271–2.

The poetry is a come-down from *Paradise Lost*, despite the fact that Rogers filched quite a lot of his pale fire from *Samson Agonistes*. The passage tells us something which Milton, writing in the early 1640s, never mentioned, the fact that Galileo was blind at the time of Milton's Italian journey. The lunar mirror of Clearchus becomes in Rogers a chronological mirror: Milton, looking at the fallen Galileo, was looking at his own future.

We are reaching the point of deep homologation, and as we do so my own seeming digression from direct engagement with Gnostic heresy is brought home, is subjected in its turn to a species of homologation. Galileo, like Faust, is a figure of forbidden *gnosis*, or knowledge. In the old heresy of the Ophites Jehovah was branded a tyrant because he made eating from the tree of knowledge into a crime. Although Milton is likely to have known about the Ophites from Irenaeus and Augustine (and would have been aware of similar ideas, nearer home, in the theology of the Ranters) he is not allowed to say—perhaps, does not allow himself to think too explicitly—that the God who condemned Adam and Eve was a wicked God. Poets can of course allow themselves to think the unthinkable when they are writing speeches for bad or newly fallen characters; Adam, after eating the apple, comes very close to saying that God is wicked when he speaks of the hideous absurdity of heaping an eternity of suffering upon a mortal creature fitted by nature for finite burdens only (x. 796–808). But the poet himself must not speak in this way. Thus we have a latent analogy which is both importunate in its inner cogency and impermissible. The Inquisition is straightforwardly wicked for Protestant Milton. Galileo is fallen, but is a fallen *hero* of knowledge. Notice that the implied scriptural reference of the Miltonic simile is no longer to Lucifer (who did not fall because of an act of knowing but merely because he 'felt himself impaired', v. 665); the reference, as in Rogers's poem, is forward in time, to the fall of Adam and Eve. The Homeric digressive mode has here a function, perhaps, to repress or muffle a homologation which could prove dangerous.

It is a commonplace of intellectual history to say that the Renaissance could not help admiring the pursuit of knowledge. Hence tags like 'Marlowe's Dr Faustus was a Renaissance man

who paid a medieval price'. I have argued that what is wrong with such tags is their implication that the damnation motif is a decaying left-over from the Middle Ages. On the contrary, the Calvinist view of man as having zero capacity, totally depraved and naturally damned, was coming, hot and strong, from the Reformers at the same time as the opposite view, enforced by Platonists, Hermetists, and magician–scientists, that through extended knowledge man could ascend into the firmament, could become quasi-divine. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, as we saw, contains many Gnostic elements and was still influential when Milton was young; 'The virtue of the soul is knowledge. He who has got knowledge is good and pious; he is already divine.'[22] This is almost exactly what the serpent says to Eve in Genesis.[23] The shift of Gnosticism from the world-scorning transcendentalism of the Apocryphon of John to the divine alchemy of Zosimus led, afterwards, to the charlatans, magicians, conjurors, and scientists of the sixteenth century.

As we move a little nearer Milton's time, we may recall how Arthur Acheson, Dover Wilson, M. C. Bradbrook, and Francis Yates used to excite their readers with stories of a School of Night, a group of dangerous freethinkers, associated with atheism and necromancy, surrounding Sir Walter Ralegh. The School of Night may never have existed under that name, but dangerous talk there certainly was, and star-gazing, telescope-using characters such as Thomas Harriot were among the talkers. Harriot—'that devil Harriot' as the judge called him at Ralegh's trial—was mathematical tutor in Ralegh's household and accompanied him on the voyage to Virginia in 1585. The crystallomantic Dr John Dee was, as we saw, simultaneously a hermetical philosopher, a scientist, a conjuror, an astrologer, and a fraud.

Galileo is the point at which all of this becomes real science as we understand the word today, and Galileo (who, like

[22] *Poimandres*, x. 9, in *Hermetica*, ed. and trans. W. Scott, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924–36), vol. i, p. 193; in *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. Nock and Festugière, vol. i, p. 117. Cf. *Poimandres*, xvi. 15, 'But the rational part of the soul remains . . . fit to receive God into itself', ed. Scott, vol. i, p. 271, ed. Nock and Festugière, vol. ii, p. 236.

[23] A point noted by C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), p. 169.

Newton, seen in effigy by Wordsworth in Trinity College chapel at Cambridge) voyaged through strange seas of thought alone, was brought down by the Inquisition. Although Galileo is 'modern science' there is a sense in which Milton's picture of him was old-fashioned by the late 1650s (when Milton is likely to have begun *Paradise Lost*). By this date Francis Bacon had, so to speak, tamed Luciferan science by abolishing secrecy, by insisting on shared scientific results, and by inventing the scientific committee. But for Milton the astronomer remains heroically isolated in his viewing tower, alone with his dangerous freedom.

The link is certainly too frail to allow me to speak of influence but I suspect that some slender skein is stretched between Milton's Galileo and Keats's Cortes, who is likened to 'some watcher of the skies, when a new planet swims into his ken'.[24] No doubt Keats's 'watcher' is less close to Galileo than to Herschel, who saw the planet Uranus for the first time on 18 March 1781, but Galileo's glimpse of the moons of Jupiter remains analogous. Certainly Galileo was guilty of 'a wild surmise'. But where Milton's gazer is given a heavenly body suddenly materialized, debased in brute matter, a new world but a world stained, like ours, Keats's New World traveller stares out instead upon an ultra-American vacancy: no rivers and mountains now, but the illimitable Pacific. Milton's moon is Lucifer fallen and a mirror perhaps to our own fallen world; his Galileo is Faust condemned, Adam unparadised. Adam and Eve when they fall indeed in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* are likened to the native inhabitants of America. Milton thinks first of the (Old World) Indian herdsman at ix. 1108 but then, one suspects, the Indian turns, at the back of his mind, into an Amerindian, and we meet the lines,

> Such of late
> Columbus found the American so girt
> With feathered cincture, naked else and wild
> Among the trees on isles and woody shores.
> (ix. 1115–18)

The lines from the Proem to Book II of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* about new worlds inside the moon are linked by the poet not

[24] 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', 9–10, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1972), p. 62.

only to the future extension of knowledge ('Later times things more unknown shall show') but also to travellers' reports of Peru, the Amazon, and 'fruitfullest Virginia'. The scientist–sages of Bacon's *New Atlantis* tell the voyagers who visit of Amerindians dressed in feathers.[25]

Is Milton's simile, then, Homeric or Virgilian? In poetry surfaces are important. I therefore say now, as I said at the beginning: this is a Homeric, digressive simile, offering a window upon difference. At the same time, however, there is, as I have tried to show, a huge, intricate *latent* homologation, not with the shield, but with Satan, with Adam and Eve, with the whole poem, which is the story of a fall. That the homologation is latent, as is not normally the case in Virgil, is crucial. We do Milton no service if the end of our critical exegesis is to render explicit that which urgently needs to remain implicit. We must not discover too easily that our Homeric excursion led in the end to a darkened glass, in which we see our own fallen faces. Why this is hell, nor are we out of it.

Galileo's great rival in his own time was Kepler. Kepler wrote an early science-fiction story called the *Somnium*. It is about a voyage to the moon. The travellers find when they get there that earth-set, the going down of the earth in the lunar sky, looks like a mountain on fire.[26] In the twentieth century, when human beings set foot on the New World, they were able as it were to turn and look back. There hung in the sky one marvellous, beautiful thing, a great shining sphere of marbled blue and white. They were looking at our own world of pain and wickedness, the only other live thing in that black, sterile heaven.

(II) Milton's Theodicy: The Argument from Freedom

Paradise Lost is a poem about the problem of squaring a wholly benevolent, omnipotent God with the obvious imperfection of the world he made, with evil and with sin. Since Leibniz published his *Théodicée* in 1710 we have learned to

[25] Bacon, *Works*, ed. Spedding, *et al.* vol. iii, p. 143.

[26] *Kepler's Somnium*, trans. with a commentary by Edward Rosen (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 21.

call this exercise in justifying God 'theodicy'. The natural movement of Milton's intellect and will was towards monism: one God (no Trinity), one world, one truth, one sense. But his poetry, as Blake saw, is made of binary tensions. Notoriously he is the Puritan who, in a most un-Puritan manner, is in love with classical mythology; when he writes a masque for the Welsh marches, he undertakes, like a good Protestant, to dethrone the ancient King of Revel ('Comus' is Greek for 'revel'); the King of the Wood is defeated indeed, but only with the help of someone who looks, in some ways, more like a friend of Comus than an agent of sober reason, the river spirit, Sabrina; the old nature gods, whose drunken worshippers the Lady so feared to meet (*Comus*, 176–8) are invoked in a triumph of pagan genre over Christian will in the dance at the end of the piece. *Samson Agonistes* Hebraizes Greek drama and Hellenizes the Book of Judges. The very word 'argument', offered by Milton at the beginning of his poem ('that to the highth of this great argument . . .', i. 24) is instantaneously liable to a binary fission of meaning, the sense 'summarized story' being displaced, as we read, by 'rational demonstration'. We may reflect for a moment on the fact that Greek has two words for 'word', *logos* and *mythos*; the first developed systematically in the direction of 'rationale', the second towards 'myth', 'story'. If we speak of 'the problem of evil' we invite a philosophical reply—a *logos*—but if on the other hand we are concerned with an instinctive sense of slippage—that the world has in some way gone wrong—we invite an answer at the level of *mythos*.

Let us look first at the *logos* of *Paradise Lost*. The opening of the poem is amazingly brave. Milton undertakes to 'justify the ways of God to men' (i. 26). Some feel that the courage borders upon arrogance. The etymology of 'arrogance', *arrogantia*, gives us not simply 'pride' but, together with pride, a presumptuous usurpation, arrogating to itself what properly belongs to another. The word 'justify' in Milton's line is indeed an extraordinary instance of such arrogance in the etymological sense, because in the seventeenth century the word was normally used in an exactly opposite manner: we do not justify God; he justifies us. There are indeed some instances in Milton's time of the word 'justify' being used in the sense to

which we have become accustomed, 'demonstrate the rightness of', applied in secular contexts. When God enters the scheme, however, we feel at once the seismic effect of the prior ontology of divine redemption. 'Justify not thyself before God', says Ecclesiasticus (7: 5). When God appears we cannot justify ourselves; how much less, then, should we dream of justifying him? Yet this is what Milton, grandly or absurdly, proposes to do.

It will be said that the famous line, to 'justify the ways of God to men', is preceded by a prayer and that this makes all the difference. It is true that Milton, before he dictated these words, called on the heavenly Muse (i. 16) and then on the Holy Spirit (i. 17). I have written elsewhere on the strange war of egoism and humility in this invocation.[27] The heavenly muse is half-classical and therefore half-conventional. Her aid is invoked for

> my advent'rous song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above the Ionian mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
>
> (i. 13–16)

The poetry, wiser than *logos*, knows what is happening. We have seen enough in Marlowe, and others, to sense that flight means heroic, possibly doomed, presumption: Icarus, Simon Magus, Faustus (and Sidney, poet in the zodiac of his own wit)—dangerous flyers, all. We found a strange dynamism in the very grammar of the Prologue to *Dr Faustus*:

> Till swoll'n with cunning of a self-conceit,
> His waxen wings did mount above his reach
> And melting heavens conspir'd his overthrow
>
> (20-2)

Here we saw how the expected personal subject 'he' (as in 'he flew too high') is proleptically replaced by an impersonal subject, 'wings'. The effect is to permit the initial self-assertion of Icarus to be overtaken by forces somehow outside the control of the agent—perhaps (by the time Marlowe's sentence

[27] *Openings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 81–3.

is completed) by predestination itself. In Milton's 'Icarian' sentence, too, there is a shift from the expected personal subject to an impersonal: instead of 'I intend to soar' we are given 'my advent'rous song . . . intends to soar' (13–14). This modification of the expected subject is much less powerful in Milton than it was in Marlowe. In *Dr Faustus* the force of the grammatical metamorphosis is propulsive: it surprises the mind by propelling it into a fresh and more alarming conception of causality. In Milton one senses that the change has occurred because here, on the contrary, the brakes are being applied. Milton has frightened himself. He therefore seeks to distance himself from this singing poem he has set in motion, this great argument whose waxen wings are indeed about to mount above his reach. 'Advent'rous' is an interesting choice. I have described it elsewhere as 'an unrepentant, banner-waving word, with associations with chivalric epic—even perhaps with Dante's unresting, doomed voyager, Ulisse'.[28] Because his poem has now taken to the air on its own wings, it is as if Milton, from the precarious neutrality of his newly acquired spectator-status, can risk a degree of admiration for the sheer daring of the enterprise.

Nothing here is stable. We are aware as we read that the device of shifting responsibility from the singer to the song is frail. Milton invokes the Muse, half-Christianizes her with 'heavenly', steps from the ascending chariot of poetry to admire its flight but then at last confesses, as the sentence nears its close, that nothing less than real inspiration by the Holy Spirit ('chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer | Before all temples the upright heart and pure . . .' i. 17–18) can save him from blasphemy. It may be thought that we have now come full circle: Milton is admitting that his justification of God must originate from God himself, in which case, after all, God, not Milton, is justifying God. This pious humility however, is also, in its turn, unstable. At ix. 20–4 Milton speaks of the heavenly Muse, Urania ('my celestial patroness') who comes to him each night and 'dictates' his verses. Urania is not quite the Holy Spirit, but the passage undoubtedly presents the doctrine of inspiration in its strongest, most literal form. Either Milton

[28] Ibid., pp. 81–2.

believed this, *simpliciter*, or wanted very much to believe it, as he entered upon the narrative of the temptation itself. But here in the primary invocation, at the beginning of the poem—a point at which we may suppose that the projected argument from freedom is still 'looking good'—we have a slightly different state of affairs. God is not, after all, going to dictate to Milton the terms of his theodicy. Rather he is to act, in a preliminary manner, on the mind and soul of the poet, rendering him fit to attempt the task. The conclusion, which is what everyone remembers, gives us an ego in command, both grammatically and theologically:

> That to the highth of this great argument
> I may assert eternal providence
> And justify the ways of God to men.
>
> (i. 24–6)

Musically the dominant chord comes last. Milton has remounted the chariot of his song, assumed the reins, and is now launched on his more-than-Pegasean flight.

The turning inside-out of 'justify' remains a spectacular feat. Why did it happen? I have great sympathy with those who say 'Because that is the sort of person Milton was—an arrogant egoist'. Perhaps, however, we can add a supplement. Milton grew up in a country dominated by that Calvinist theology which we saw crucifying Faustus in Marlowe's play. It is clear to me that no one could 'live Calvinism' in every detail of the moral life (since to do so is to discover that, because of the doctrines of total depravity and double predestination, one has no moral life at all). Nevertheless large numbers of people were persuaded that God predestined unborn children to eternal damnation. Depravity is inscribed in the mere fact of humanity, carried in the blood. John Donne told his flock in a sermon, 'There in the wombe wee are fitted for *workes of darknes*, all the while deprived of light: And there in the *wombe* we are taught *cruelty*, by being *fed with blood*, and may be *damned*, though we be *never borne*.'[29] The reaction to such a doctrine

[29] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), vol. x, p. 232. See also John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, 2nd edn. (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 119.

today would be likely to be a recoil into complete atheism. Although it is clear that there were atheists (in the modern sense) in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England,[30] it was not easy then to drop one's belief in God. We must therefore imagine many thousands of persons continuing to believe in a deity who seemed to be wicked. God knows not only all our doings but also all our thoughts. The God of Calvin is nothing if not frightening. If you believe that *this* God is watching you, then, despite the fact that your fear springs from an intensified consciousness of his ferocity, you dare not say even in your heart that he is wicked, lest he hear. 'Despite' becomes 'because'.

The great suppression of moral hostility to God under Calvinism may have been far more violent psychically, than the nineteenth-century suppression of sexuality charted by Freud. In such an atmosphere of thought-muffling terror, the emergence of the idea that Calvin might have been wrong would have an extraordinary impact. Suddenly one is allowed to say what one had thought yet not allowed oneself to think: 'This God of Calvin is wicked', since 'this God' is not after all the real one. As early as 1584, in a sermon preached at St Paul's Cross on the text, 'As I live (saith the Lord) I delight not in the death of a sinner' (Ezekiel 33: 11), Samuel Harsnett ringingly proclaimed his contempt for a Calvinistic doctrine which, while he was speaking, was utterly dominant: 'There is a conceit in the world . . . that *God should designe many thousands of soules to Hell before they were, not in eye to their faults, but to his own absolute will and power, and to get him glory in their damnation*. This opinion is grown huge and monstrous (like a Goliah) and men doe shake and tremble at it.'[31] Some time in the 1630s the black doctrine of predestination became an enemy in flight, routed, it now seemed, by true doctrine, by good Christian thinking. God, implicitly vilified by Calvin's teaching, is suddenly justified by the new Arminian doctrine of human freedom. The entirely Christian joy of this discovery would make people wish to shout out the good news,

[30] See Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 112, 127–8, 132, 198–205, 323, 458.

[31] In *Three Sermons preached by Dr Richard Stuart . . . to which is added . . . a Fourth Sermon, preached by . . . Samuel Harsnett* (London: printed for Gabriel Bedel and Tho. Heath, 1656), pp. 133–4.

'God is good!' And now the Miltonic revolution has happened. God the justifier has become the object of justification.

Of course 'justify' here does not yet bear the sense 'render just' but rather 'show to be (always to have been) just'. Nevertheless the underlying heady sensation of a 'Copernican revolution' in theology should not be discounted. Freedom is like strong drink. By the Copernican hypothesis the earth ceases to be the still centre of a wheeling universe and becomes a planet, 'a wanderer', circling the sun. I have written elsewhere of the 'Kinetic Fallacy', in which changes in astronomical theory are treated as if they were changes in astronomical fact.[32] The first effect is one of mere dislocation. 'The sun is lost', wrote Donne, of 'the new philosophy' ('The First Anniversary', 207). In Donne's *Ignatius His Conclave* Copernicus has changed the created cosmos, showing thereby that he is of the Devil's party. He tells Lucifer that he has 'turned the whole frame of the world, and am thereby almost a new Creator'. In raising the earth to the heavens he has, he explains, promoted Lucifer (who lives in the middle of the earth) and has downgraded the sun, which was 'an officious spy', working for God.[33] It has often been observed that Milton, having chosen to work with the pre-Copernican geocentric system as the dominant scheme for *Paradise Lost*, that is, the scheme which Dante had used in the *Commedia*, nevertheless departed from his great medieval predecessor in his cosmological placing of Satan. Dante's Satan lives in the middle of the earth: the Dantean universe, strictly speaking, is not so much geocentric as diabolocentric. Milton's Satan falls from the crystal battlements of heaven into Chaos and discovers a hell unimaginably remote from that system of circling bodies we call the universe. After his great journey in search of Adam and Eve, having recrossed Chaos, he sees in the distance

> This pendant world in bigness as a star
> Of smallest magnitude close by the moon
> (ii. 1052–3)

Careless readers of *Paradise Lost* mistake this 'world', this tiny drop of light, for the terrestrial globe. What Satan sees in the

[32] *Pope's Essay on Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 83–5.
[33] *Ignatius His Conclave*, ed. Healy, p. 15.

distance is in fact the entire Ptolemaic universe. He must descend through the starry spheres before he can alight on Niphates' top. There is a word in Gnosticism for this un-Dantean Satan: *Allogenes*, 'other-born', 'stranger to the world', the mysterious truth-bearer of the Sethian pantheon.[34]

The mad astronomer in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* is a person for whom the trope of the Kinetic Fallacy has solidified, has become merely real. He believes that he has the power to alter the positions of the heavenly bodies not only in diagrams but in real space. There is a whiff of the Kinetic Fallacy about Milton's violent transposition of justification, now grandly offered by man to God, a touch of the Archimedean 'Give me a point on which I may stand and I will move the world.'[35] Behind the relatively modest claim that he will show how, really, God has always been good, there is an excited, hyperbolical sense that the poet is changing God, as Copernicus flung the sun into the middle of the universe. This sense will be stronger for those to whom philosophical idealism comes naturally, that is, to those who think that our mental categories constitute the real. That such idealism was in the air, on the 'Icarian' side of the equation, is clear in the words of Agrippa about the Gnostic power of dispelling mists and collecting clouds into rain (p. 68, above). Agrippa really is very like the mad astronomer in *Rasselas*.

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, I. iv, one can watch Milton fighting his way clear from predestinarian theology. Gilbert Ryle once observed that it is a fallacy, retrospectively imposed by historians of ideas, that philosophers have 'positions' (for example, that Plato believed in the theory of ideas).[36] Working philosophers know that it is never like that in practice. Live philosophy is always a process, involving an endless tidal motion of *pro* and *contra*, varying degrees of confidence and doubt. Scholars like Maurice Kelley and Alastair Fowler have perhaps tended artificially to 'freeze' Milton's thought. The particular element in extreme Protestant thought which Milton selects for attack is the peculiar doctrine of the double will of

34 See Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 58.

35 In Pappus Alexandrinus, *Collectio*, Book VIII, prop. 10, section 11, ed. F. Hultsch, 3 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1878), vol. iii, p. 1060.

36 *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 9.

God. According to this theology, God has a public, 'visible' will and a private, secret will. Hieronymus Zanchius explains that

> it was His revealed will that Pharaoh should let the Israelites go, that Abraham should sacrifice his son, and that Peter should not deny Christ; but, as was proved by the event, it was His secret will that Pharaoh should not let the Israelites go (*Exod.*, iv, 21), that Abraham should not sacrifice Isaac (*Gen.*, xxii, 12) and that Peter should deny his Lord (*Matt.*, xxvi, 34). . . Man is not excusable for neglecting God's will of command. Pharaoh was faulty, and therefore justly punishable, for not obeying God's revealed will, though God's secret will rendered that obedience impossible.[37]

The underlying logic is very simple. Because everything that happens happens by God's will, history reveals the true, secret will of God. If it happened, it is what he wanted. If bad things happen, he must have wanted them to happen. Unless we adopt the desperate shift of asserting that the evil of this world is an illusion, we now have the basis for a strong *a posteriori* argument against the goodness of God. Calvin was entirely willing to face the consequence that God is therefore the author of evil.[38] Certainly he willed and predestined the fall of man.

Milton in response does not immediately discard the idea of election, but rather argues that election is conditional on human effort. It is an error to suppose that election is substantially identical with full Calvinist predestination. Calvin taught the doctrine of *double* predestination, that is, not just that certain persons are chosen for salvation but that both the saved and the damned are predetermined as such from the beginning of time. This gives the 'supralapsarian' view that Adam's fall was itself predestined. Milton wrote, contrariwise, 'God did not predestine reprobation' (*DDC* I. iv, p. 173). In line with this Milton has the Father tell the Son in *Paradise Lost* that if the fallen angels had been predestined to fall the episode might have stood as a just accusation of God, but in fact they fell freely (iii. 112–7). But later he adds,

37 *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*, trans. A. M. Toplady (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1930), pp. 47–8. Cited by Maurice Kelley in his commentary on *DDC*: *CPW*, vol. vi, p. 177.

38 *Institutes*, I. xvi. 8, I. xviii. 2, I. xiv. 7, ed. McNeill and Battles, vol. i, pp. 208, 231–2, 129.

> Some have I chosen of peculiar grace
> Elect above the rest; so is my will
>
> (iii. 183–4)

It is probably a mistake to suppose that Milton is here veering back towards Calvinism. At *DDC* 1. iv (p. 176) he rejects the narrowly technical meaning of 'elect' and insists that the word is properly applicable to all who persevere in belief. That the Father should will such free obedience in the creature is perfectly consistent with Milton's Arminianism. But if will should turn into action—if pre-election should turn out to contain an element of causation or even predisposition—we would indeed be moving back towards Calvinism.

Explaining his notion of conditional election, Milton writes,

> The general decree of election is individually applicable to each believer, and is firmly established for those who persevere.
>
> The whole of scripture makes this very clear. It offers salvation and eternal life to all equally, on condition of obedience to the Old Testament and faith in the New. Without doubt the decree as it was made public was consistent with the decree itself. Otherwise we should have to pretend that God was insincere, and said one thing but kept another hidden in his heart. This is, indeed, the effect of that academic distinction which ascribes a twofold will to God: the revealed will by which he instructs us what he wants us to do, and the will of his good pleasure, by which he decrees that we will never do it. As good split the will in two and say: will in God is twofold—a will by which he wishes and a will by which he contradicted that wish! But, my opponents reply, we find in scripture these two statements about the same matter: God wishes Pharaoh to let the people go, because he orders it: he does not wish it, because he hardens Pharaoh's heart. But in fact God wished it only. Pharaoh did not wish it, and to make him more unwilling God hardened his heart. He postponed the accomplishment of his will, which was the opposite of Pharaoh's, so that he might punish the latter all the more severely for his prolonged unwillingness. (*DDC* I. iv, pp. 176–7)

There is a very interesting wobble in Milton's thought in this passage. His style remains forthright, but here at least the ghost of Calvin can still shake his mind. It is the reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart which causes the trouble. 'My heart's so hardened, I cannot repent', said Dr Faustus (II. iii. 18). We have seen how easily a Calvinist reading of this phrase

could impose itself on Marlowe's play. The passage in Exodus met Calvin's need very exactly since it showed how God himself was the author even of a godless obduracy in the creature, since he hardens the heart of the unrepentant sinner.

Naturally the passage is difficult for Milton and very nearly has the effect of reinstating in his thought the Calvinist notion of God causing the sinner to sin. God hardens Pharaoh's heart, says Milton, so that he can (justly!) punish him the more severely. It will be said that exacerbating the sin of Pharaoh falls short of full predestination, but for all that the discomfort is acute. The whole passage is similar in feeling to the notorious prose 'argument' to Book V of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton writes, 'God, to render man inexcusable, sends Raphael to admonish him of his obedience, of his free estate, of his enemy near at hand . . .'. By Arminian theology 'to render inexcusable' must be seen as an anticipatory shorthand, as if the entire action were seen for a moment through the foreknowing mind of God, so that the expanded meaning would be something like 'to render man's action morally significant, which, in the event, will mean "show that it will have been sinful", for God knows how Adam and Eve will choose'. Foreknowledge need have no influence on the fault. But foreknowledge knows (naturally) that the sin will be committed. Meanwhile, however, the word 'render' will be felt by the reader as a heavily causal term. Most worryingly of all, the whole phrase, 'to render inexcusable', turns out to be a thoroughly Calvinist form of words. In the *Institutes* we read, 'The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable'[39] (*ut reddatur homo inexcusabilis*).[40] In the French *Institution de la religion chrestienne* we have 'de rendre l'homme inexcusable'.[41] Notice how the structure of our earlier analysis of 'justify' ('show the manifest justice of' as against 'prove the justice of') is here repeated in our analysis of 'render inexcusable'. Shelley, in his famous sentence indicting the God

[39] *Institutes*, II. ii. 22, ed. McNeill and Battles, vol. i, p. 282.

[40] *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 49 vols. (*Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. xxix–lxxxvii) (Berlin: Braunschweig, 1863–1900), vol. ii, p. 204.

[41] 'Texte de la première édition française' (1541), ed. A. Lefranc, H. Chatelain, and J. Pannier (Paris: Bibliothèque de L'École des Hautes Études, 1911), p. 61.

of *Paradise Lost*, found out this element of quasi-Calvinism in Arminian Milton:

> Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of *exasperating him to deserve new torments*.[42]

Milton, having been blown off course by the text on God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, recovers and drives on hard with his central, anti-Calvinist assertion of human freedom:

> To order us to do right but decree that we shall do wrong!—this is not the way God dealt with our forefather Adam, nor is it the way he deals with those he calls and invites to grace. Could anything be imagined more absurd than such a theory? To make it work, you have to invent a necessity which does not necessitate and a will which does not will. (*DDC* I. iv, p. 177)

Man, Milton says, 'was going to fall of his own free will' (*DDC* I. iv, p. 173).

It is natural that people should feel nervous about attempting a theodicy—suppose they were to fail? Suppose God is not good, but is still there, watching and waiting? But when an argument appears which really seems to reconcile this evidently sad and faulty world with an all-good, all-powerful Creator, it can surely be embraced (perhaps with an eagerness which smacks of relief). Milton almost certainly thought that the freedom of created man supplied him with such an argument; it meant that God really was as good and loving as everyone had always said. For it is easy to see how an all-good, all-powerful God might not want automata, but on the contrary might want creatures who did not merely mirror his will but acted independently. If the creature has no freedom, Milton writes, 'whatever worship and love we men offer to God is worthless and of no account,' *DDC* I. iv, p. 189, a nice summary of Herbert's running problem in *The*

[42] Emphasis added. Shelley liked this sentence and used it twice: in 'On the Devil and Devils' and in 'A Defence of Poetry'; see *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. B. Forman, 8 vols. (London: Reeves & Turner, 1880), vol. vi (*Prose*, vol. ii), p. 288 and vol. vii (*Prose*, vol. iii), pp. 127–8.

Temple). 'Freedom' *means* that the creature can diverge from the Creator; that is how things went wrong—because God, in a manner which is wholly consistent with infinite goodness, allowed genuine independence from himself to exist.

In the *De Doctrina Christiana* this idea is applied, pretty consistently, to the fall of man, as if Milton were confident that it accounted for the origin of evil. When Milton moves, however, from *logos* to *mythos* and begins in *Paradise Lost* to *tell the story*, it soon becomes evident that the fall of man was not the beginning of evil; there was an earlier fall, that of Lucifer from heaven. This, certainly, is presented as the result of an action of pure freedom (the words 'free', 'freely', and 'freedom' re-echo in the lines):

> I made him just and right,
> Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
> Such I created all the ethereal powers
> And spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;
> Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
> Not free, what proof could they have given sincere
> Of true allegiance, constant faith or love,
> Where only what they needs must do appeared,
> Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
> What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
> Where will and reason (reason also is choice)
> Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
> Made passive both, had served necessity
> Not me. They therefore as to right belonged,
> So were created, nor can justly accuse
> Their maker, or their making, or their fate,
> As if predestination overruled
> Their will, disposed by absolute decree
> Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
> Their own revolt, not I
> . . . . . .
> They trespass, authors to themselves in all
> Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
> I formed them free, and free they must remain,
> Till they enthrall themselves
> . . . . . .
> they themselves ordained their fall.
>
> (iii. 98–117, 122–5, 128)

Here, within the poem, it seems that God is once more doing the justifying, but he is justifying himself, not us. The near-exultant tone of the passage becomes wholly forgivable when we sense the human poet behind the divine words. It is Milton who is exultant that God should have had nothing to do with evil; evil simply arose from free action on the part of the creature. Of course it is really Milton who, as he promised at the beginning of the poem, is doing the justifying.

The fall of man, meanwhile, because it is secondary, because it is a result of Satanic temptation and perversion, is already becoming blurred:

> The first sort [i.e. the rebel angels] by their own suggestion fell,
> Self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived
> By the other first: man therefore shall find grace . . .
>
> (iii. 129–31)

Milton must have known from the outset that the story he would have to imagine in detail would be that of Adam, not that of Satan. As he entered upon his work of imagining he must have begun to see that, even if Adam was free, he would, if he was good, have chosen to reject Satan and to obey God. Here at least freedom alone seems after all not to account for the Fall. Milton must have encountered, imaginatively, the famous objection of Augustine: 'When the first human beings began to be evil, they did so in secret, and this enabled them to fall into open disobedience. For the evil act could not have been arrived at if an evil will had not gone before.'[43] The word 'secret' is interesting: Augustine has created an area of darkness, a place of inaccessible mystery, in which the inexplicable thing—the origin of evil—is now deemed to have occurred. Freedom is indeed a necessary precondition of the Fall and we may re-express this idea, if we wish, by saying that freedom makes the Fall possible. But freedom alone will not account for any particular instance of falling, of departing from the will of God, especially if the human subject is morally unimpaired. The principle holds even in the fallen world. If we ask 'Why did that nice, well-adjusted young man murder his sister?' we shall hardly be satisfied with the answer, 'Because he was free to do so'.

43 *De Civitate Dei*, xiv. 13, trans. Green, vol. iv, p. 335.

At this point *mythos* seems to step in with saving force. Adam and Eve were indeed good. They fell because they were pushed. The serpent tempted them and they did eat. It will be obvious, however, that we are now in deep philosophical trouble. If Adam and Eve fell *only* because they were pushed, they are victims, guiltless and in no way deserving of punishment. If on the other hand Adam and Eve in any degree assented to the proposition of Satan, they forthwith become justly punishable, but Augustine's thesis of prior corruption grows strong again; they must have been secretly corrupted before to assent to such a thing. A temporary breathing-space is purchased by the story of Satan's temptation, and nothing more. Meanwhile, if we were to tell the story of Satan's fall in like detail, the Augustinian presumption of prior corruption would, quite ineluctably, arise there also. For the moment, while writing of Satan, still unassailed by the strong imaginative test of detailed *mythos*, Milton can hold still to the doctrine, 'He fell because he was free'. When narrative begins to develop, as at v. 660 ff., we are at once in danger. Lucifer, seeing the Son proclaimed Messiah, is consumed with envy and 'thought himself impaired' (v. 665). Why, if he was a good, loving spirit, did he not rejoice spontaneously at this just honour accorded to the Son? There must have been something wrong with him already.

The self-justification of God in *Paradise Lost*, Book III, is both joyful and vigorous, but even here one can sense that doubts are beginning to invade, especially when human beings are allowed to enter the field:

> The first sort by their own suggestion fell,
> Self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived
> By the other first: man therefore shall find grace
> The other none: in mercy and justice both,
> Through heaven and earth, so shall my glory excel,
> But mercy first and last shall brightest shine.
>
> (iii. 129–34)

The effulgence of mercy at the close of the sentence may be in part an attempt to dazzle and so silence the sceptical intelligence. A mercy granted on grounds of mitigation is scarcely mercy at all, but more like complex as distinct from simple justice. Grace is, properly, *gratis*, gratuitous, a freely given,

unearned gift; but here grace itself is conditional upon the fact that human kind was deceived. Suddenly—and in a most bizarre fashion—Milton's God looks less generous than Calvin's. For Calvin, at least grace was always pure, unalloyed grace. It is as if Milton's great fear is that, in rejecting predestination, he will appear to have diminished the majesty of God. As Adam and Eve recede, as it were, from the status of 'Primary Assertors of Independent Freedom' and become victims of Satan's guile, Milton senses the possibility of sheer injustice; he then averts or dissolves the injustice by saying, 'Well, really, God does at least take all this into account; look how he gives them, later, an opportunity he never gave to Satan.'

(iii) The Garden as Maze

> Man shall not quite be lost, but saved who will,
> Yet not of will in him, but grace in me
> Freely vouchsafed . . .
>
> (iii. 173–5)

'Saved who will' seems to offer, once more, the 'freedom thesis' in full confidence: it is up to man. This, however, is abruptly cancelled in a nervous spasm by the following line, 'Yet not of will in him, but grace in me' which seems to fall back into the Calvinist doctrine of the necessity of prevenient grace before man can perform any good action. 'Election conditional upon human will', the doctrine of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, seems to give way to 'human will conditional upon a prior grace'. There is, however, a passage in the *De Doctrina* which is interestingly similar:

> the following objection may perhaps be made: if you decide that God has predestined men only on condition that they believe and persist in their belief, then predestination will not be entirely a matter of grace but will depend upon human will and faith, so that the esteem in which divine grace is held will not, in fact, be consistent with its real importance. I insist, on the contrary, that it will be absolutely consistent . . . The condition upon which God's decision depends, then, entails the action of a will which he himself has freed and a belief which he himself demands from men. If this condition is left in the power of men who are free to act, it is absolutely in keeping with justice and does not detract at all from the power of divine grace. For the power to will and

believe is either the gift of God or, insofar as it is inherent in man at all, has no relation to good work or merit but only to the natural faculties. God does not then, by my argument, depend upon the will of man, but accomplishes his own will, and in doing so has willed that in the love and worship of God, and thus in their own salvation, men should always use their free will. (*DDC* I. iv, pp. 188–9)

Here also Milton is clearly assailed by a sudden fear that he may seem to have reduced the majesty of God. Maurice Kelley in his commentary on the *De Doctrina* cites two passages from the Calvinist William Perkins which show exactly why Milton had cause for anxiety: 'This is flat to make God's will hang upon man's will, to make every man an Emperor, and God his underling, and to change the order of nature by subordinating God's will, which is the first cause, to the will of man.'[44] The second passage, which is from *A Christian and Plain Treatise*, reads 'If God did reject men, because he saw that they would reject him, reprobation should not depend upon God, but upon men themselves'.[45] It is often said that Calvinism sacrifices God's love to his power. Therefore it may be supposed that any move away from Calvinism will entail some reduction of the divine power, if only by making it less than love. Milton, clearly, is genuinely disturbed by this thought. His answer is that in fact the moral greatness of God is increased rather than diminished by his granting freedom to created man. He wills that man should will—man independently decides the outcome, indeed, but it is God's will that he should so decide.

Now if the Father in *Paradise Lost* were to reproduce this doctrine he would need to say,

> Man shall not quite be lost, but saved who will,
> Saved by that power to choose which my will gave

Instead we have the dislocating line

> Yet not of will in him, but grace in me.

Where the *De Doctrina* triumphantly reconciles grace and the sovereignty of God's will with human freedom, the embar-

44 Cited *DDC*: *CPW*, vol. vi, p. 189 n. From *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed* in *The Workes of . . . Mr William Perkins*, 3 vols. (London: J. Legatt, 1616–18), vol. i, p. 295.

45 Cited *DDC*: *CPW*, vol. vi, p. 189 n. In Perkins, *Workes*, vol. ii, p. 610.

rassed grammar of the Father's utterance in *Paradise Lost* permits human freedom to be after all erased by grace. The theology of the *De Doctrina* is, however, recovered as the Father explains that he will exercise his grace in renewing human power of choice, resistance to evil, and the like. It may be that Milton was momentarily detained by the thought that, between the Fall and the Incarnation of Christ, man's freedom may have been impaired, so that a special burst of grace, so to speak, was required to put him back on an even keel. Even so, the abrupt switch from 'saved who will' to 'yet not of will in him' remains disturbing.

If Adam and Eve did not fall through pure exercise of freedom, the awkward question, 'Why did God allow them to be pushed from the orbit of perfect goodness?' grows more importunate. So Milton feels, suddenly, a need to reaffirm the overarching love and power of God. He can no longer do this with full philosophic clarity, because Adam and Eve *were* pushed. Milton cannot avail himself of the 'pure-freedom-willed-by-God' argument of the *De Doctrina*. The result is an intermittent regression to the model of divine majesty which dominated his childhood, to the prevenient grace and will of the Calvinist God.

Meanwhile Milton's God cannot help knowing what will happen. If God knows now that I will have lunch tomorrow at a quarter past one, am I free to have lunch at any other time? Is not my sense that I choose when to have lunch an illusion?

The most famous answer to this problem is that given by Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. Between the time of Boethius, the beginning of the sixth century AD, and Milton's, others argued for the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, but the main credit belongs, I believe, to Boethius. God's foreknowledge of an event does not force it to happen; rather, because God is outside time, effective causality can and does run in the opposite direction: a thing does not happen because God foreknows it; rather, he foreknows it because it really will happen.[46] In modern English we might say that Boethius is proposing a distinction between coercion

[46] *Consolatio Philosophiae*, V. iii, in *Boethius, The Philosophical Tractates*, with an English translation by H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1962), pp. 374 ff.

and entailment. If I know now that Jane, across the room, is sitting on the brown armchair, it is immediately entailed that she should be sitting on that chair and no other. But my knowledge is not coercing or forcing her to sit there. If, as I watched, she rose and then sat on another chair, I would know that too; there would again be complete entailment and an entire absence of coercion. When, in connection with Marlowe, we became enmeshed in the intricacies of strenuous morality allied with a belief in absolute predestination, I suggested that a secular version of the problem was available in Newcomb's paradox (the wise psychologist and the boxes containing money). So here, a version of the problem exists in which God makes no appearance. It is either true or false, now, that I will have lunch tomorrow at a quarter past one. If it is true, am I free to have lunch at half-past twelve? If it is false, am I free, as I thought I was, to have lunch at a quarter past one? The mere truth or falsity of future propositions entails but does not coerce relevant future events.

Milton quite clearly makes use of the Boethian solution. In *Paradise Lost* the Father says of the fall of the angels,

> If I foreknew,
> Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
> Which had no less proved certain unforeknown
> (iii. 117–19)

Milton never mentions Boethius in the *De Doctrina* but his argument is plainly stated:

> By virtue of his wisdom God decreed the creation of angels and men as beings gifted with reason and thus with free will. At the same time he foresaw the direction in which they would tend when they used this absolutely unimpaired freedom. What then? Shall we say that God's providence or foreknowledge imposes any necessity upon them? Certainly not: no more than if some human being possessed the same foresight. For an occurrence foreseen with absolute certainty by a human being will no less certainly take place than one foreseen by God . . . Nothing happens because God has foreseen it, but rather he has foreseen each event because each is the result of particular causes which, by his decree, work quite freely and with which he is thoroughly familiar. So the outcome does not rest with God who foresees it, but only with the man whose action God foresees. (DDC I. iii, p. 164)

Milton is clear that foreknowledge exerts no coercion: 'Fate or divine decree does not force anyone to do evil', he wrote, in the *Art of Logic*.[47] In the *De Doctrina* he says of foreknowledge, 'since it exists only in the mind of the foreknower, it has no effect on its object' (*DDC* I. iii, p. 165).

Milton holds that a God who decrees freedom not necessity has more moral grandeur than the God of Calvin. Meanwhile, however, it is inescapable that, as a result of this theological adjustment, certain initiatives pass from God to man. We began with just such a shift: human Milton justifying God, the Justifier of mankind. The word 'justify' in Milton again and again produces a kind of explosion in the concept of originative power. Take the following passage, where the tangled language deserves to be followed with care:

> If God justified believers, and believers alone, because only belief justifies, then he foreknew only those who would be believers, for he justified those he foreknew . . . Therefore those he justified were the same as those he foreknew, namely those alone who would believe . . . For no man believes because God had prescience about it, but rather God had prescience about it because the man was going to believe. (*DDC* I. iv, pp 182–3)

Here 'justify' has the old, strong theological meaning, 'render just' and is untouched by the later sense 'prove by argument to be just'. But observe how the primacy of God's Originative Justification is infected with uncertainty because it is now seen to be involved in the weakened version of foreknowledge, that is, with non-coercive, non-causative foreknowledge. We have no sooner been told that God justifies, than we are suddenly informed that 'only belief justifies'. There is a certain effect of dislocation, as there was when the Father said, 'Yet not of will in him . . .' (iii. 174). The Boethian reversed 'because' (from 'It will happen because God foreknows it' to 'God foreknows it because it will happen') comes through clearly at the end: freely exerted human belief will decide whether justification shall or shall not take place. To be sure, man justifying man still falls well short of the audacity of Milton justifying God.

The irony is deep. When Milton thought he could justify

47 I. v, *CPW*, vol. viii (1982), p. 229. Cited by Kelley, *DDC*: *CPW*, vol. vi, 165 n.

God, it was on the basis of the thought, 'Evil entered because Lucifer (or Adam) was free'. Similarly, believers are justified by God because he foresees that they will believe. The effect of the Boethian analysis, however, is to weaken the word 'because' in each of these sentences. Taking the second first, we have already seen that effective causation, on Boethius's view, runs in the opposite direction: in any particular case it is the existing human belief which will produce in the divine mind the peculiar pre-cognitive content associated with justification. In the case of the first sentence it is suddenly evident that the mere fact of freedom will not of itself coerce or oblige anyone to sin. If divine foreknowledge never made anyone sin, if the fact that it is true now that I shall lunch tomorrow at one will not force me to do so, then still less will the simple fact that Adam was free to do as he wished *make* him sin against God. In this last example we do not even have tight entailment as distinct from coercion. Freedom operates, so to speak, at a further logical remove. Freedom entails only the possibility, not the commission, of sin.[48] I am suggesting that the more heavily Milton relies on the Boethian version of divine foreknowledge and the further he goes in narrowing the concept of 'effective causality', the more it will come home to him that the very human freedom which this theology is framed to protect will no longer account, in any particular case, for the existence of evil. If God did not cause Adam to sin, then Adam's freedom did not cause him to sin, either.

Mythos is in any case pitiless to such bland generalizations from *Logos*. To tell the story of Eve, all sweetness, goodness, and love of God, encountering a snake who invites her to disobey the Father who made her, is to set up a sequence in which the sheer explanatory frailty of 'She fell because she was free' will be inescapable. The whole line of argument becomes unusable, under one's hand. The reader will not need the acumen of Augustine to say, 'She needs first to be corrupted'. It is, I surmise, this pressure of mere narrative which propels Milton into astonishing, brilliant, finally evasive poetic action.

The myth Milton inherited seeks to appease the difficulty of understanding the fall of man through a technique of

48 See my *Overheard by God* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 105.

reduplication—behind the fall of man is the fall of Lucifer. Because Lucifer is now corrupt he can give the required shove, to an uncorrupted Adam and Eve. In like manner Milton, in his own narrative, embarks upon a fascinating process of multiplication, in order to dazzle where he cannot refute. The relative starkness of Genesis is replaced by a baffling profusion. Eve must be unfallen until she takes the apple, but she must be such that she would take it, which is as much as to say, she must be already fallen. To meet the case we need two Eves. Notoriously, the person who divided all humanity in two was Sigmund Freud: we desire and we do not desire that our fathers should die. Milton, under extreme pressure, almost invents the Freudian Unconscious.

Satan cannot corrupt the conscious mind of Eve before the known point of crisis, but what about her unconscious mind? When Satan reaches Paradise and becomes most dangerous, he does not grow in physical stature, but shrinks. The angelic guards, strong to repel the most powerful enemy, are defeated by this low thing which slips over the wall unseen, the voyeur, the squat toad. Eve, whose reason would have been proof against any diabolical temptation, lies stretched out in sleep. Her rational self gives way, therefore, to the dream self, the imaginative self, the unconscious, which Satan can penetrate.[49] The angels, Ithuriel and Zephon, at last discover Satan:

> him there they found
> Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve;
> Assaying by his devilish art to reach
> The organs of her fancy, and with them forge
> Illusions as he list, phantasms and dreams,
> Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
> The animal spirits that from pure blood arise
> Like gentle breaths from rivers pure, thence raise
> At least distempered, discontented thoughts,
> Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires
> Blown up with high conceits engendering pride
>
> (iv. 799–809)

It is not even certain whether Satan has actually begun his devilish hypnopaedia of Eve. In such circumstances as these,

49 See W. B. Hunter, 'Eve's Demonic Dream', *ELH* 13 (1946), pp. 255–65.

however, every kind of uncertainty helps the poet. Milton's use of the indefinite purposive form, 'to reach' and so on, leaves the matter unresolved. When Satan is brought before the higher authorities, Gabriel, the superior officer, though of 'stern regard' (iv. 877) seems less than certain with regard to the charge against Satan:

> Employed, it seems, to violate sleep . . .
>
> (iv. 883)

Loitering with intent? Nevertheless, we sense that, probably, Satan *had* begun his work.

The word 'assaying' in line 801 is interesting. One expects, given the general atmosphere of indistinct purpose, the word 'essaying', meaning 'trying'. It is true that if we go back far enough we shall find that 'assaying' and 'essaying' were the same word. In the seventeenth century they are still felt as differing forms of the same word, but at the same time a differentiation of sense is beginning to appear: the form 'assaying' tends to be restricted, as it is today, to the meaning, 'testing in the manner of a scientist'. In short, the word smells of alchemy. Galileo himself (remember Satan's shield and 'the Tuscan artist') wrote a book about the new astronomy called 'The Assayer' (*Il Saggiatore*, 1623). As in the simile of the shield, we find a disturbing imaginative oscillation between hard and soft, substantial and insubstantial: 'organs of fancy', 'forge | Illusions', each is a kind of oxymoron.

The proto-Freudian atmosphere of the passage springs in part from these psycho-physical hesitations. Peter Gay observes that Freud's habitual use of mechanistic language, 'neurons', 'quantity', 'biological rules of attention and defence', was instilled in him by his early medical training.[50] In his 1915 paper, 'The Unconscious', Freud worries about the fact that the Unconscious is full of emotions, because 'it is surely of the essence of an emotion that we should be aware of it'.[51] He notices, in effect, that the *Un*-conscious is really an *Infra*-conscious: the anti-mentalist model of repressed matter is

[50] *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 34.

[51] In his *Papers in Metapsychology, The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), vol. xiv, p. 177.

suddenly invaded by mentalist terms, such as 'intention'. Moreover, if we are not conscious of the fact that we are repressed, it begins to look as if the Unconscious must consist not of repressed matter only; it must include the mechanisms or agents of repression. Down there in the underworld we find not only criminals, but also policemen. Pascal said, 'Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point' (*Pensées*, iv. 277): 'The heart has its reasons, of which reason is utterly ignorant'; the Unconscious has a mind of which Mind is wholly unaware. Meanwhile Pascal's reference to the heart may remind us of another moment in *Paradise Lost*, another fall-before-the-Fall , where we are told how Satan tempted the mother of mankind, 'Into the heart of Eve his words made way' (ix. 550). This seems to be real corruption, happening before our eyes, but heart is not head. The real Fall is still to come. Freud suggests that mentalist elements like negation and uncertainty are introduced only as a result of censorship operating between the Unconscious and the Pre-conscious.[52] His recourse to the word 'between' is a desperate shift, a mere pretence that an inexplicable discontinuity can somehow be bridged. It is all curiously reminiscent of Descartes's notorious attempt to explain how unextended mind could act upon extended matter through intermediate 'animal spirits', to explain, that is, how 'the ghost' can actually work 'the machine'. 'Animal spirits' is itself a subdued oxymoron. It takes us straight back to Milton's lines:

> Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
> The animal spirits that from pure blood arise
> Like gentle breaths from rivers pure, thence raise
> At least distempered discontented thoughts . . .
>
> (iv. 804–7)

We think of Milton as reading everything but I know of no evidence to suggest that he read Descartes. The present passage, certainly, is no such evidence, since 'animal spirits' crop up frequently in the psycho-physiological writings of the period. But the Cartesian problem of linking mind with not-mind and the much later Freudian problem of linking Conscious with Unconscious are both implicit in this great,

[52] Ibid., p. 186.

seminal passage. 'Inspiring venom' is yet another psycho-physical oxymoron, poetically but not philosophically controlled. Meanwhile the single word 'spirit' is an imploded oxymoron: a Barfieldian 'primal unity' on the point of splitting into (physical) breath on the one hand and (immaterial) essence on the other. By the end of the sentence 'venom'—metaphor, of course, but a very physical metaphor—has been transmuted into 'thoughts'. Eve's mind is entered by the Mindless Gate, her reason is subverted at the level of her irrational self. Her Unconscious falls but Eve herself is still upright. It is enough, at the level of *mythos*, to generate a sense of plausibility when the Fall itself happens. The Roman poet Virgil sent his hero Aeneas down under the earth, so that he could find his way to his dead father. At the end of the particular book of the *Aeneid* which deals with this journey of self-renewal we are told that the underworld has two gates, a gate of horn by which true dreams escape to the upper world, and a gate of ivory through which the false dreams pass (vi. 893–6). In Keats's *Eve of St Agnes*, Porphyro, the seducer, hopes to slide into Madeline's dream of her perfect lover, to substitute himself for her fantasy (136–9, 280–322). In *Paradise Lost* Satan passes back through the Ivory Gate of Lies, slips into her dream, and infects it with his own falsity. Gabriel's description of the crime as a *violation* of sleep (iv. 883) seems, after all, a fair description. When Eve herself narrates the troubling dream to Adam at v. 36–93 the reader of the poem is himself assailed by enormous (Luciferan?) poetic power.

Satan entering the dream of Eve remains the most important 'pre-echo' of the Fall. The environs of her reason are undermined before reason itself is reached. In the faintest, the most fugitive of all the many pre-echoes in this poem, we can watch the *physical* environment of the action, the garden itself, lapsing from a static perfection into an exciting dynamism. In Book IX, Adam and Eve, the first gardeners, yet unfallen, sing their morning hymn and then prepare to work. But the garden, we learn with surprise, is getting out of hand:

> for much their work outgrew
> The hands' dispatch of two, gardening so wide.
>
> (ix. 202-3)

The impact is (deliberately, I would guess) faint indeed, but it has the required effect: nothing is actually identifiably wrong but things are slipping. Once more this, operating at the level of *mythos*, will make it easier to believe, when the time comes, that perfection could fail.

The difficulty with the newly challenging garden leads Eve to propose, at ix. 217, that they should divide the labour and work separately, he in one place, she in another. Adam says that, because they have been warned of a possible danger, Eve should stay close to him, under his protection (ix. 253–69). Eve does not agree.

> that thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt
> To God or thee, because we have a foe
> May tempt it, I expected not to hear
> . . . . . .
> what is faith, love, virtue, unassayed . . .?
> (ix.279-81, 335)

When Gulliver enters the cold paradise of the Houyhnhnms he causes the 'rational horses' to have their first debate (before, they had agreed about everything). Satan, having entered the Garden of Eden, before he has spoken face to face with either party, has caused them to fall into dispute—harmonious dispute but still dispute. The 'prose argument' to Book IX reads, 'Eve loth to be thought not circumspect or firm enough, urges her going apart, the rather desirous to make trial of her strength'. Has evil entered Paradise? Has Eve fallen already? She is now resisting her husband's rightful rule. What has happened to the Eve described in the line? 'He for God only, she for God in him' (iv. 299)? This time the dazzle-effect is produced by a reduplication within the structure of morality itself. Eve's proleptic 'vice' is, according to another 'moral set', mere virtue. Here Eve exchanges the virtues of passive submission for the dynamic virtue of a courage which actively seeks to be tested. She sounds, as many have noticed, very like the younger Milton who wrote in *Areopagitica* (1644) that he could not praise 'a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd and unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat' (*CPW*, vol. ii, p. 515).

We have here a time-loop stranger than any in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. Eve's prior 'corruption', necessary to render her capitulation to the serpent plausible, is made to appear consistent with unfallen virtue, by subjecting virtue itself to an anticipatory transformation, by suddenly assimilating Eve's innocent perfection to the kind of strenuous virtue which is appropriate in a *fallen* world. 'Unfallen pre-corruption' is proleptically identified with postlapsarian virtue. We must either say that what passes for virtue in this fallen Vale of Tears is so far short of Edenic virtue that it will pass for corruption in a paradisal setting, or else, more mysteriously, that Eve in this strange moment of prelapsarian instability prefigures the harsher splendours of the after-time. As she answers her husband, she starts the sequence of causes which will indeed bring into existence that dark world of tested, dynamic virtue. Paradisal virtue, unalloyed, cannot yield a voluntary fall. The fallen will come only from that which is, in some way, already fallen. One is reminded of the time-travel story of the artist who painted boring pictures when young and brilliant pictures when old; all is explained when we learn that this artist travelled in a time machine into the future, saw the brilliant paintings he had done in his later years, returned to the former time and fell to industrious imitation of the brilliant works he had seen, in this way producing the marvellous work of the later phase. Future causes past.

At ix. 571 the Serpent begins to engage Eve's interest in the forbidden tree by means of poetry and fiction.

> I was at first as other beasts that graze
> The trodden herb, of abject thoughts and low,
> As was my food, nor aught but food discerned
> Or sex, and apprehended nothing high:
> Till on a day roving the field, I chanced
> A goodly tree far distant to behold
> Loaden with fruit of fairest colours mixed,
> Ruddy and gold: I nearer drew to gaze;
> When from the boughs a savoury odour blown,
> Grateful to appetite, more pleased my sense
> Than smell of sweetest fennel or the teats
> Of ewe or goat dropping with milk at even,
> Unsucked of lamb or kid, that tend their play.
> To satisfy the sharp desire I had
> Of tasting those fair apples, I resolved

> Not to defer; hunger and thirst at once,
> Powerful persuaders, quickened at the scent
> Of that alluring fruit, urged me so keen.
>
> (ix. 571–88)

Blake said that Milton was of the Devil's party without knowing it. Evidently, the relationship is reciprocal. Satan is a true poet and of Milton's party. It is sometimes said that it is *logically* absurd to call, say, Shakespeare's Richard II a 'poetical' sort of person, because Richard is a character in a verse drama: the poetry is Shakespeare's, not Richard's. Richard, however, is stylistically differentiated from the other characters in the play. All speak verse but he alone speaks that special Ricardian high poetry. So here; *Paradise Lost* is in verse from beginning to end, but for all that the poetic register leaps when Satan speaks as he does here. Milton the poet must put forth all his strength.

Milton's friend Marvell also wrote a poem about a garden. This lyrical, witty meditation on innocence and sexuality gradually heats up, reaching its highest point in a stanza which is often called 'Keatsian' because of its astonishing sensuousness:

> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarene, and curious peach,
> Into my hands themselves do reach;
> Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
> Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass
>
> (35–40)

Keats's poetry is famous for its refusal to rest content with the Apollonian delights of the visual; he proceeds from sight to the more intimate senses, smell, touch, and above all taste. As Keats, so Marvell here. Satan's lines, in their turn, are remarkably oral. In 'The Garden' the grapes thrust themselves into the poet's mouth. In Satan's speech the ruddy gold of the fruit seen in the distance gives place to a sweet smell which takes him unawares and this leads to the orality of the teats, dripping with milk at evening time, a hunger and thirst not so much to eat and drink as to suck.

If we thought of Freud when Satan entered Eve's dream, we may do so again here. The intense intimacy of Satan's poetry is simultaneously infantile and charged with sexuality. When Eve

first sees her own face in the stream (iv. 461–6) she is overwhelmed by her own beauty. Here Satan confronts the mother of mankind, and maternity is entwined with desire, imagery of fruit is merged with the liquid imagery of milk. Blake's principle is clearly upheld: Milton will never write such poetry for the Father or the Son. Eve is caught first in her dreams, then in her anticipatory courage, now by her responsiveness to poetry, her imagination. Every poet wants the kind of auditor Satan found in Eve. Her slower husband, still armed strongly in the inert morality of Eden, lags behind, waiting to be inducted into the next phase.

It is an error to suppose that Blake was the first person to think of devils as poets. Justin Martyr (AD 100?–165) says in the fifty-fourth chapter of his First Apology that all the poetic myths were first inserted in men's minds by evil spirits. Moreover, as we saw earlier, the anonymous author of the *Panegyrico por la poesia* (1627) affirmed that Satan was a poet.[53]

The exchange ends with Eve's words, 'Lead, then' (ix. 631). The serpent glides before her as an *ignis fatuus* flits above marshland. Perhaps at this point Milton felt that he had overweighted the pre-corruption of Eve and needed to redress the balance. They reach the tree and Eve remarks that Satan might have spared himself his trouble since this is the tree from which they have been forbidden to eat (ix. 651, 662). It is here that Milton is able to insert the words 'yet sinless' (ix. 659). The fact that Milton felt that the words were needed is perhaps even more significant than the words themselves. Satan for his part now moves in more closely with the last, overwhelming, temptation. This after all is the tree of knowledge. Knowledge gives life, not death. He, Satan, has tasted it and—look—he lives and breathes unscathed by 'the threatener', (ix. 687, a marvellously terse, wholly Gnostic reference to God the Creator). All knowledge is by relation and difference. Those who know good only, without contrasting evil, do not really know good. Why should gods be unwilling that others should share their food, their knowledge? As Satan falls silent, Eve, who is feeling hungry for

53 St Justin, *Apologies*, text, French translation, and commentary by André Wartelle (Paris: L'Institut Catholique de Paris, 1987), p. 172 (see above, p. 55). On both Justin Martyr and the *Panegyrico*, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Trask, p. 557.

the most natural reason in the world—it is dinner-time (ix. 739)—begins to be drawn to the fruit exactly as Satan was drawn in his poem–story; she experiences

> An eager appetite, raised by the smell
> So savoury of that fruit, which with desire,
> Inclinable now grown to touch or taste,
> Solicited her longing eye . . .
>
> (ix. 740–3)

She pauses and thinks: a prohibition of knowledge, that is of something which is in itself good, cannot be morally binding (ix. 760). And so she falls.

> So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
> Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:
> Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat
> Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,
> That all was lost.
>
> (ix. 780–4)

Milton tries to explain the Fall by telling a story, by using *mythos* to do the work of *logos*. He gives us one of the grandest of all aetiological myths. As I have written in another place,[54] narrative alone, 'And then . . . and then . . . and then . . .', will never explain anything which is really difficult. Only a twilit intelligence can rest content with a story which seeks to explain the beginning of something by deriving a simple series from an arbitrary first term: 'How did ships begin?' 'There was a man called Jason and he made the first ship and sailed over the sea' and so forth. At the same time, however, myth, which seems so weak in explanatory force, can prove a powerful destroyer of hasty rationalizations. Milton subjects his hypothesis, 'They fell because they were free', to the test of detailed story-telling, and the mere fact of narration (rather than Milton himself) throws up the awkward truth that they must have been bad already to choose as they did. This means that the myth designed to account for the origin of evil has had to presuppose, as occurring at an earlier point in the story, the very element whose first appearance it purports to explain.

54 *Overheard by God*, p. 101.

G. E. Moore would say that we have bumped our noses on the Naturalistic Fallacy, the fallacy of supposing that one can ever derive an Ought from an Is.[55] Freud's narrative account of the origin of guilt and morality, in an exactly similar manner, ends by presupposing what it sought to explain. One day, long ago, certain sons, being jealous of their father who had control of all the women, rose up and killed him. Afterwards they felt both grief and exultation and from this heady brew guilt sprang into the world.[56] Freud like Milton goes in for a sort of 'dazzle-effect' by multiplying the emotions, but the obstinate thought remains, 'They would not have felt guilty about killing the father unless they were already moral beings'. The 'staggered fall' of *Paradise Lost* is breathtakingly inventive, but the surge in imaginative energy springs from what is in a way a discreditable source, the felt failure of the proffered explanation. Meanwhile, as we have seen, the accompanying thesis that divine foreknowledge did not cause the Fall finally issues not in a strengthening of the argument from freedom but in a weakening of it.

I have suggested that there is an element of dishonesty in this reduplication of narratives. But the central drive of the myth, that is, of the primary story which then prompts the flurry of anticipatory miniature narratives, is itself immensely honest. It is precisely the story which, once it has been set forth in detail, forces us to reflect, 'Either this is not Eve's fault (in which case she does not deserve to be punished) or she is indeed responding culpably (in which case she must already be fallen): God must have formed her, imperfect'. The critical movement, from innocence to corruption, has moved outside our field of vision and remains wholly unexplained.

(iv) The Fortunate Fall

One way out remains: to argue (since one has failed to account for the existence of evil under an all-powerful God) that what

[55] See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 10, 13–14. Cf. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III. i. 1, ed. Selby-Bigge, p. 469.

[56] See *Totem and Taboo*, iv. 5 and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, vii, in *Complete Works*, vol. xiii, p. 142 and vol. xii, pp. 131–3.

we are looking at is not really evil at all. This is the ancient doctrine of the *felix culpa*, or 'fortunate Fall'. Without the Fall there would have been no Redemption and without the Redemption we could never have got to heaven, a better place than Eden. The convulsive change whereby the Worst Thing that ever happened became the Best Thing that ever happened may smack of crankiness or, at best, of wilful paradox, but the doctrine is orthodox enough to appear in the Roman Catholic liturgy. It can be glimpsed in Book III of *Paradise Lost*. There the Father tells the Son how, through him, mankind shall be redeemed, receive new life (294–300) and how

> The world shall burn, and from her ashes spring
> New heaven and earth, wherein the just shall dwell,
> And after all their tribulations long
> See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds
> With joy and love triumphing, and fair truth.
>
> (iii. 334–8)

Near the end of the poem the archangel Michael tells Adam of the great conflict to come between Satan and God, and ends by saying that the Redeemer

> thence shall come,
> When this world's dissolution shall be ripe,
> With glory and power to judge both quick and dead,
> To judge the unfaithful dead, but to reward
> His faithful, and receive them into bliss,
> Whether in heaven or earth, for then the earth
> Shall all be paradise, far happier place
> Than this of Eden, and far happier days
>
> (xii. 458–65)

Milton's hesitation over the question whether the new happy place will be located on earth or in the sky does not disturb the basic logic: the place you reach after the Redemption will be better than the Garden of Eden. Slightly more worrying perhaps is his simultaneous insistence on God's heavy judgement on unbelievers; one senses that the poet enjoys this almost as much as he enjoys the thought of a new heaven—it is all part of the good news. Adam joyously draws the full Fortunate Fall conclusion:

> O Goodness infinite, goodness immense!
> That all this good of evil shall produce
> And evil turn to good
>
> (xii. 469–71)

Again we catch the accent of intellectual relief: God's goodness saved once more, not from Calvin this time, but from a kind of prescient incompetence.

Michael ends his account of future history with the words

> So shall the world go on,
> To good malignant, to bad men benign,
> Under her own weight groaning till the day
> Appear of respiration to the just,
> And vengeance to the wicked, at return
> Of him so lately promised to thy aid
> The woman's seed, obscurely then foretold,
> Now amplier known thy saviour and thy Lord,
> Last in the clouds from heaven to be revealed
> In glory of the Father, to dissolve
> Satan with his perverted world, then raise
> From the conflagrant mass, purged and refined,
> New heavens, new earth, ages of endless date
> Founded in righteousness and peace and love
> To bring forth fruits joy and eternal bliss.
>
> (xii. 537–51)

A far more beautiful vision of the doctrine, entirely free from all this Michelangelesque gigantism, can be found in the medieval carol:

> Adam lay y-bounden
> Bounden in a bond;
> Four thousand winter
> Thought he not too long;
> And all was for an apple
> An apple that he took,
> As clerkes finden written
> In theire book.
>
> Ne had the apple taken been,
> The apple taken been,
> Ne hadde never our Lady
> A been heaven's queen

> Blessed be the time
> That the apple taken was!
> Therefore we may singen
> 'Deo Gratias!'[57]

Since A. O. Lovejoy wrote his celebrated article, 'Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall'[58] D. R. Danielson has produced his *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy*.[59] Danielson insists that for Milton the Fall was unfortunate. His principal reason is that a switch to belief in the Fortunate Fall renders Milton's careful theodicy in terms of creaturely freedom irrelevant. Since I have myself suggested that Milton is likely to have become aware, in the process of composing *Paradise Lost*, that his theodicy was not working, it will be obvious that I am unlikely to be swayed by this argument. Danielson also suggests, however, that it is a mistake to assume that, if Adam had never fallen, he would never have attained the higher state. 'The acute and distinct Arminius'[60] revered by Milton said that if our first parents 'had persisted in their obedience', it is 'very probable that, at certain periods, man would have been translated from this natural life, by the immediate change of the natural, mortal and corruptible body, into a body spiritual, immortal and incorruptible, to pass a life of immortality and bliss in heaven'.[61] Thus the Fall is no longer a *sine qua non*, the only way one can reach heaven. Danielson shows with a wealth of examples how often this view was expressed. The point is not made, heavily, in *Paradise Lost*, but it is there. Long before the Fall the angel Raphael tells Adam and Eve,

> Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,
> Improved by trait of time, and winged ascend
> Ethereal . . .
>
> (v. 497–9)

57 Text from *The New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1950*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 13–14.

58 *ELH* 4 (1937), pp. 161–79; repr. in *Critical Essays from ELH* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), pp. 163–81.

59 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, esp. pp. 202–27.

60 *Areopagitica*: *CPW*, vol. ii (1959), p. 519.

61 *The Writings of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, 3 vols. (Auburn, Ala.: Derby, Miller and Orton, 1853; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), vol. ii, p. 73.

I suspect that Milton may have pulled back from this notion for two reasons. At first he may have felt that an Eden of developing, growing creatures was a place of imperfection, of incomplete goodness. While his confidence in his projected theodicy was still strong, this would have looked like a concession he scarcely needed—or, worse, an embarrassment, since God might already appear to have admitted to his scheme—at the point of creation—the one element, imperfection, which Milton was ready to explain as a pure consequence of creaturely freedom. The second reason, I suggest, comes into play later and is, indeed, almost the opposite of the first. If the theodicy-through-freedom was failing, the Fortunate Fall was now needed in a strong form. All this is guesswork, indeed. Everything we know about Milton, however, reminds us of his hatred of half-way houses, of mitigating partial arguments. Meanwhile the text itself, first through the words of the Father and then by the tongue of an angel, powerfully asserts the evil-turned-to-good thesis, without a word of alternative routes to the same felicity.

Once again we may feel that *mythos* has appeared and will create trouble. God is *Logos*, synchronic, timeless, and so inexplicable in terms of narrative sequences, unless those sequences somehow issue at last in a saving rational simultaneity. In this new story of a Fortunate Fall we simply forget that freedom of the creature which seemed so crucial and proved so frail. God's determinative power can, if we wish, assume Calvinist proportions, since now he predestines only a means to greater bliss, and so remains unproblematically good. If, however, the ultimate bliss alone constitutes true perfection, why did not God, who can do all things, proceed directly to that end? Omnipotence is not shackled to the creaking apparatus of happy ends versus unhappy means. All ends, except those which are inconsistent with his nature, are immediately practicable. He has no need to engage in the narrative dynamics of developing sequences. In a way Arminius is exploiting this fact when he offers an alternative progression; there is for God no necessity, no sense of *sine qua non* in either scenario. The stasis of the Christian God properly implies a timeless theology; the vindication of such a supreme being can never be a story.

The difficulty can be alleviated, if not cured outright, if we

consider what I have described elsewhere as 'the naturalist *felix culpa*'.[62] According to this view, the Fall does not *lead*, through a long sequence, to ultimate good; rather, it is good immediately. Adam and Eve as they fall are instantly promoted, by authentic moral knowledge, to an arena of strenuous virtue (I have already hinted at some of this when I remarked on the strange, sudden growth of the plants and on the anticipating courage of Eve when she chose to go apart from Adam in the garden). Notice that while Raphael's observation that they might have reached the higher state anyway (iv. 497–9) may be damaging to the orthodox Fortunate Fall ('No Fall, no redemption'), it has no such destructive effect on the naturalist *felix culpa*. The higher state half-promised by the angel would never be the dramatic, darkened field of moral heroism which this world affords. 'No Fall, no felicity' continues to work because the notions of a fall and of true moral felicity are now not serially linked but are instead intertwined. I have hitherto assumed that where postlapsarian morality differs from prelapsarian, the postlapsarian will be evidently inferior. Once we are allowed, however, to think of the Fall as 'happy', this need no longer be the case. As soon as we find ourselves free to make the case for the superiority of the strenuous, postlapsarian morality, we discover its real strength, especially for one of Milton's temperament.

In the centrally heated world of Eden, before Satan came, no one could ever be brave because no one was ever in danger. No one could ever feel pity because no one was ever hurt. Even conjugal love, where it subsists between persons who never disagree, can seem a weak, bloodless thing when set beside the love of sinners in the darkened world. Edwin Muir wrote a poem called 'One Foot in Eden' which contains these lines,

> But famished field and blackened tree
> Bear flowers in Eden never known
> Blossoms of grief and charity
> Bloom in these darkened fields alone,
> What had Eden ever to say
> Of hope and faith and pity and love

[62] *Openings*, pp. 92–3.

> Until was buried all its day
> And memory found its treasure-trove?
> Strange blessings never in Paradise
> Fall from these beclouded skies.[63]

Blake, the presiding genius of this book, caught the same idea in 'The Human Abstract',

> Pity would be no more
> If we did not make somebody Poor;
> And Mercy no more would be
> If all were as happy as we.
>
> (Songs of Experience, E, p.27)

Plotinus, breathing the rarefied air of Platonist ontology, once wrote that evil lives not alone; because of the power and nature of good, it will always be found to be wound round with ropes of good, 'like a captive bound in fetters of gold'.[64] His thought is conditioned by the idea that being is itself good, so that pure evil would have no admixture of being, would not exist.[65] The Devil himself, in so far as he still exists, still glistens with the goodness of his original creation. Milton turns this ontology to poetic account when he says of Satan that

> his form had not yet lost
> All her original brightness
>
> (i. 591–2)

Here, however, the terms of the old ontology are reversed: the highest good cannot exist without evil. Good lives not alone but shines brightest when wound round with ropes of pain. That is why God was obliged by his own goodness to expend himself in pain and sin.

Where the naturalist *felix culpa* emerges as a solution reached in the course of a narrative of events, it will be plain that it cannot work as a complete solution of the Problem of Evil. The lump in the pillow, beaten down in one place, pops

63 *New Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Gardner, p. 868.

64 *Enneads*, I. viii. 15, in *Plotinus*, with an English translation by A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, 6 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1966), vol. i, p. 316.

65 Ibid. I. viii. 11, trans. Armstrong, vol. i, p. 306. Cf. Milton, *DDC*, I. vii: *CPW*, vol. vi, p. 310, 'All entity is good: non-entity not good'.

up in another. If we are thoroughly persuaded that the highest good is inconceivable without dubiety and pain, then indeed we can reconcile this world with divine omnipotence and goodness. But now we have, strangely enough, the Problem of Heaven (or Paradise). If this world is really the higher state why did not God proceed directly to the realization (exactly the point we made earlier in reference to a remote, eschatological bliss)? Again we run into the impossibility of joining time to the timeless, the dynamic to the static, narrative to an already realized and conclusive perfection. Evelyn Waugh's foolish-worthy schoolmaster, Prendergast, suffered, it will be remembered, from doubts; what bothered him was not anomalies of ritual or doctrine but the simple question, 'Why did God create the world at all?' Why add, to an existing, infinite perfection, variously limited existents? Prendergast is in very good company. The same question exercised the formidable intelligence of Leibniz: 'La sagesse doit varier', 'The divine wisdom had to engage in variation' he says, firmly but somehow helplessly.[66]

Of all Christian writers Dostoevsky is the one who argues most intricately and powerfully that goodness and degradation are mutually involved. The problem of the evil of this world is, in a sense, no problem to him. No other Christian writer of comparable stature has so little to say about heaven or Eden. His Christianity can absorb anything but harmony. We must grant that the 'I' of Dostoevsky's last story, 'The Dream of a Ridiculous Man' tells how, in the night when he resolved to kill himself, he dreamed of a world which was our world and yet unfallen, full of light and love. As we read, however, we begin to detect a faint note of burlesque: these people live in contact with 'the universal Whole'.[67] Like Gulliver in the land of the Houyhnhnms, the narrator finds to his horror that he has brought corruption to this place of innocence, that he is himself the snake in the garden. Here inexorably the logic of Ophite Gnosticism (of which he had never heard, I suppose) asserts itself more and more in the writing:

[66] *Théodicée*, 124, in *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, ed. G. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), vol. vi, p. 179.

[67] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *White Nights; A Gentle Creature; The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, trans. Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 121.

They learned grief and grew to love it . . . and said that Truth could only be attained through it. Then science appeared among them . . . Knowledge is superior to emotion, cognition of life superior to life . . . I walked among them, wringing my hands, and wept over them, though loving them . . . I grew to love the earth they had defiled even more than when it had been a paradise . . . I begged them to crucify me on a cross and taught them how to make one.[68]

Irony continues to flicker in the prose, but the serpent who led the way to knowledge has turned under our eyes into a kind of Christ. To reason in this way is to transform the slow progression of mankind towards a higher bliss into immediate promotion. Happiness is no longer *hedone*, 'pleasure', but is rather *eudaimonia,* the special blessedness of a higher state (Socrates, discontented, has more *eudaimonia* than a contented pig). In the ordinary meaning of the term we shall indeed find it hard to say that Adam and Eve, pitched out of Eden, are in a 'happier' state. But morally and psychologically they have grown up. Their moral life has become real and this—at once—is a great good.

If we listen to the angel, we shall be forced to acknowledge that the 'naturalist' version is much less prominent than the supernaturalist . At xii. 587, however, the angel actually utters the required words: he says that by combining virtue, patience, temperance, and love Adam can find 'a paradise within thee, happier far'. Notice that patience would never have been needed in the Garden of Eden. 'Within thee' carries a faint smell of the Ranterish psychologizing of heaven and hell—turning both into inner states—although at the same time it echoes Christ's 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke, 17: 21). Christopher Hill writes, 'The Family of Love and the Grindletonians had taught that prelapsarian perfection could be attained in this life. But before the 1640s such doctrines had been kept underground. Now nothing could be suppressed.'[69] Milton's hesitation over whether to place ultimate bliss in heaven or earth (xii. 463) begins to look more significant; the move to earth precedes the move into the mind and heart of man. The angel's words 'happier far' undoubtedly assert the

[68] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *White Nights; A Gentle Creature; The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, pp. 124–6.

[69] *The World Turned Upside Down* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 166.

logic of the Fortunate Fall. God has, after all, been good to man—but now the goodness lies in a moral life we can all recognize, here and now.

Does the naturalist *felix culpa* appear nowhere else in the twelve books of *Paradise Lost*? The answer is that it appears in many other places, but in a problematic form. The new ethic is stated carefully by Satan at ix. 697–9:

> To happier life, knowledge of good and evil;
> Of good, how just? Of evil, if what is evil
> Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?

The mere fact that Milton gives these words to Satan might be thought decisive proof that he regarded the idea as wicked, were it not for the fact that Eve, unfallen, before Satan had even begun to tempt her with his arguments, is attracted by the same ethic:

> what is faith, love, virtue, unassayed?
> (ix. 335)

Eve says this when, 'desirous to make trial of her strength', she resists her husband and chooses to wander alone in the garden. When I referred to this passage earlier I quoted from *Areopagitica* the famous sentence in which Milton said that he could not praise 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue'. We need now to look at this sentence in its context. We shall find, already, in 1644, the naturalist *felix culpa*, fully formed, but we need to proceed with care.

> Good and evil we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were imposed on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt. It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good by evil. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdome can there be to choose, what continence to forbeare without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive

and cloistered virtue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. (*CPW*, vol. ii. pp. 514–15)

Milton is clear at the outset that he is describing fallen morality. Good is entwined with evil, yes, but only 'in the field of this world'. The point is reinforced later by the words, 'as the state of man now is'. Such language can naturally be read as implying a prior concession that prelapsarian morality was an altogether higher thing. The trouble is that this unfallen morality is, as it must be, left unimagined, undescribed, while Milton evidently warms to the description of the postlapsarian, strenuous, tested morality. The 'dangerous, propulsive implication'[70] that morality became real when Adam and Eve were no longer 'cloistered' in perfect security becomes vivid with the words, 'What wisdome can there be to choose, what continence to forbeare without the knowledge of evil?' I have said that Milton piously sets aside prelapsarian morality but the word 'cloistered' hints a comparison between pre- and postlapsarian, and it operates in the wrong direction: cloistered virtue is the lesser of the two. Rhetorically the shift is very cunning: the innocent *hortus conclusus*, 'enclosed garden', of Eden before the temptation, before the arrival of Satan, is now evoked by a word which, to Milton's first readers, would smell of medieval popery.

There can be no question but that Milton is thinking of Genesis and the fall of man. He says so. 'The doom of man' turns as we read into the hardly contained excitement of the actively moral life. The 'wayfaring Christian' is not only reminiscent of Isaiah 25: 8, but reaches forward to the Adam and Eve of *Paradise Lost*, setting out at the end of the poem, with the world 'all before them, where to choose'. In a copy of *Areopagitica* which Milton gave to George Thomason, the word 'wayfaring' is altered, in a seventeenth-century hand (Milton's?), to 'warfaring'; if we accept the emendation, we can say the morality has now become heroic. Within the poem Milton speaks scornfully of earlier martial epic as 'the only argument | Heroic deemed' (ix. 28–9) and finds true heroism in

[70] Nuttall, *Openings*, p. 192.

patience and martyrdom. Both of these, notice, are essentially postlapsarian; they presuppose the existence of pain. Milton scorned his predecessors in epic but he also loved them. If they erred in their examples of heroism, they made no mistake in their prior, fundamental assumption that heroism was the proper matter of epic. Blake famously contrasted Milton the poet—involved with chiaroscuro, energy, of the Devil's party—with Milton the theologian. Now, however, we seem to glimpse a moral theology which is at the deepest level in full accord with the energies of the poetry. Predictably this is the morality conferred by the forbidden tree, the dynamic virtue of the fallen.

The reader will have noticed that we have at last reached the point at which the Gnostic heresy from which we began begins once more to nag at the mind. For Milton says that this (happy?) doom lay indeed in the acquisition of knowledge of 'good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil'. Milton's thought is quasi-Gnostic and, at the same time, it is proto-Structuralist. Meaning inheres not in separate, inert chunks but in relation and difference. They who know good only know not even that. If, however, we move back in time we shall see that, while orthodoxy was always embarrassed by the fact that the forbidden tree was the tree of knowledge, Gnosticism had always been able to affirm openly that eating from the tree of knowledge meant promotion.

Such Gnosticism is—would have been for Milton—heresy. But the Greek word which gives the English 'heresy' means simply 'moral choice'. In the *Magna Moralia*, which Milton would have assumed to be by Aristotle, *hairetikos*, 'heretic', means 'person having the power to choose' (1. 21). Milton knew this of course. Commenting on the term 'heretic' in *Of Civil Power* (1659) he wrote, 'It is no word of evil note, meaning only the choice or following of any opinion' (*CPW*, vol. vii, p. 247). In *Areopagitica* itself, a few pages after the passage cited, Milton paused on the word 'heresies': 'Who finds not that *Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Jerome* and others discover [i.e. betray, in themselves] more heresies than they well confute, and that oft for heresie which is the truer opinion?' (*CPW*, vol. ii, p. 518). Milton is helped here by the fact that 'heresy', like 'cloistered' earlier, smells of popery and of that Inquisition

which condemned 'the Tuscan artist', Galileo (i. 288). It is tantalizing that Milton, in choosing his examples of ill-conceived heresy-hunting, should light upon exactly those writers who recorded with such withering scorn the doctrines of the early Gnostics for posterity.

Freedom which in the primary theodicy was to provide the explanation of sin, has metamorphosed into the essence of dynamic morality. Of course Adam in Paradise was free, but choosing between honey and plum jam is not like choosing between good and evil. 'Knowledge', 'Gnosticism', 'freedom', 'choice', 'heresy' begin to cohere. A new constellation appears in the night sky, presaging change. The word 'choice' especially recurs with great force: 'God uses not to captivat under a perpetuall childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gifte of reason to be his own chooser', 'Reason is but choosing' (*CPW*, vol. ii, pp. 513–14, 527). C. S. Lewis poured scorn on Professor Walter Raleigh's remark, 'Adam from the depth of his inexperience is lavishly sententious'. Raleigh failed to understand, said Lewis, that Adam before the Fall was unimaginably more intelligent than we are.[71] But if choice became real only after the arrival of pain and danger then Milton himself in speaking of childhood is close to implying, not just that if Adam had been created without freedom he would have been like a child, but that he actually was like a child until Satan and the tree of knowledge helped him to grow up.

'God', Milton writes in *Areopagitica*, 'gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety'(*CPW*, vol. ii. 528). There is an Icarian, Faustian, Hermetical thrill in these words. 'Wandering' is in Latin *error* and *error* can mean simply 'sin'. But this wandering is clearly good. It will be said that the sentence implies no more than the thesis of *De Doctrina Christiana*, that God wills our freedom. But literary readers will never be content with that answer. The words 'wander' and 'beyond all limit' carry us into dangerous regions.

We have seen how Milton, pressed hard by the problem of rendering Eve's fall psychologically and morally plausible, gave her a kind of pre-corruption which, because it exactly resembles postlapsarian courage, would leave the mildly confused

[71] *Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 116.

reader still able to think of her as good. We saw how Eve, before she was subjected to the rhetorical wiles of Satan, said 'what is faith, love, virtue, unassayed?'(ix. 335). Notice, again, the alchemical word 'unassayed'. This, we may now see more clearly, is precisely the scheme of postlapsarian ethics set out in *Areopagitica*, but the setting is prelapsarian. Then there is Satan's reply:

> will God incense his ire
> For such a petty trespass, and not praise
> Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain
> Of death denounced, whatever thing death be,
> Deterred not from achieving what might lead
> To happier life, knowledge of good and evil;
> Of good, how just? Of evil, if what is evil
> Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?
>
> (ix. 692–9)

It is hardly surprising that Eve is persuaded by a philosophy in which she believed already. She replies, in the authentic accents of *Areopagitica*,

> For good unknown, sure is not had, or had
> And yet unknown, is as not had at all.
> In plain then, what forbids he but to know,
> Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?
> Such prohibitions bind not.
>
> (ix. 756–60)

Within a few moments she will extend her hand to take the apple. Then and then only she falls. It is as if the Milton of *Areopagitica*, Satan, and the unfallen Eve are all on the same side, ranged against the blank prohibition of Jehovah, seeing knowledge of both good and evil as a great gift, a quickener rather than a killer of the moral life. There are signs that Milton frightened himself with these thoughts.

After the Fall Eve reflects, with infinite pathos, that she might be more lovable to Adam if she ceased to be subject to him, became more nearly his equal, and adds, 'for inferior who is free?' (ix. 825). The sentiment is of course Satanic (we are told at iv. 50 that Satan 'sdeigned subjection'). The Victorians scented in such language the heady smell of Miltonic Republicanism. Somehow the answer in terms of a confident

distinction between natural and 'positive' hierarchy ('God is really superior to man; man is really superior to woman; but kings are not superior, naturally, to other human beings') seems no longer to possess an automatic, 'knock-down' force. When Adam was newly created the first thing he did was to raise his eyes to the heaven of Jehovah, the Creator:

> Straight toward heaven my wondering eyes I turned,
> And gazed a while the ample sky . . .
> (viii. 257–8)

Eve newly made looked down and saw in a pool what seemed to be 'another sky'(iv. 459). She saw or thought she saw another kind of heaven, on earth. Remember here the 'Fortunate Fall' lines,

> for then the earth
> Shall all be paradise, far happier place
> Than this of Eden, and far happier days.
> (xii. 463–5)

When Eve is led towards the tree by the glistening snake Milton calls her 'credulous' (ix. 644) but moments before she stretches out her hand to the fruit she speaks of 'intellectual food' (ix. 768) and after eating (now fallen, of course) she says, 'I grow mature | In knowledge' (ix. 803-4). What was the motive of this silly, credulous woman? Quite clearly it was Gnostic. She wanted to know.

Areopagitica brings us very close to the Gnostic doctrine that the serpent was right when he said the eyes of Adam and Eve would be opened because they really had attained to knowledge of good and evil through eating the fruit of the tree. Other writers of the English Renaissance were driven to strange paroxysms of thought by their determination to believe, in an orthodox manner, that this acquisition of knowledge was evil. Sir John Davies in his *Nosce Teipsum* (1599) said that when we ate from the tree of knowledge we were turned from eagles, who could look upon the sun, into bats, fitted only for the dark.[72] Milton has Adam say at ix. 1070–3,

[72] Section 1, 'Of Human Knowledge', 35, in *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 7.

> since our eyes
> Opened we find indeed, and find we know
> Both good and evil, good lost, and evil got,
> Bad fruit of knowledge . . .

These words are paralleled by God's words, later:

> but let him boast
> His knowledge of good lost, and evil got,
> Happier, had it sufficed him to have known
> Good by it self, and evil not at all
>
> (xi. 86–9)

The tone of bluff common sense hardly succeeds. Neither Adam nor God engages intellectually with the argument that relation and difference are essential to the moral life. Adam, like a drinker who finds his pockets empty after a binge, ruefully reflects on his loss (where 'loss' connotes loss of pleasure rather than loss of virtue). God tells us that good might have been known separately from evil but does not explain how.

It may be said that Adam talks about the possibility of knowing evil before the Fall and expressly distinguishes acquaintance with evil from approval of evil. After Eve has narrated her disturbing dream, Adam tries to comfort her with these words,

> Evil into the mind of god or man
> May come and go, so unapproved, and leave
> No spot or blame behind: which gives me hope
> That what in sleep thou didst abhor to dream,
> Waking thou never wilt consent to do.
>
> (v. 117–21)

Here indeed we are held back from the strong thesis, 'It was only by falling that Adam and Eve became fully moral beings'. But Adam's speech does nothing to help those who would claim that good can be known for what it is without any conception of its opposite. Indeed Adam is on the verge of commending Eve for a new species of moral heroism, for seeing and yet not giving way. Remember the words in *Areopagitica*, 'He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet

distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian.' (*CPW*, vol. ii. pp. 514–15).

The Ophites knew that Jehovah must be wicked because he made knowledge into a forbidden thing. In Milton's own time Galileo, 'the Tuscan artist' of the great simile likening Satan's shield to the moon, the hero of unlicensed knowledge, was condemned by the Inquisition because of his involvement with the Copernican hypothesis, that is, the suggestion that the sun is stationary and the earth is not the centre of the universe but is in fact for ever hurtling through space. This, perhaps, was the most exciting scientific question of the time. When Raphael comes to call on Adam and Eve, Adam seizes the chance of putting this question to an angel. Raphael's response is curious. He hastily assures Adam that he has no objection to the question:

> To ask or search I blame thee not, for heaven
> Is as the book of God before thee set
> Wherein to read his wondrous works . . .
>
> (viii. 66–8)

It is the kind of reassurance which naturally sows anxiety. Something—we guess at once—must be amiss with Adam's question. The angel goes on to explain that, while it is entirely reasonable to seek information about such directly useful matters as seasonal sequence and division of the day into hours, the remoter question, 'Whether heaven move or earth' | Imports not' (viii. 70–1). Such things are, he says, a secret, which God 'did wisely to conceal' fom the lower orders of being (viii. 73). There follows an extraordinary *occupatio* (in rhetoric we have an *occupatio* when the speaker says, 'I will say nothing about the other crimes of the accused, his peculation, his lying to the police . . .' and proceeds to give a full and interesting list of the crimes-which-will-not-be-mentioned). Raphael, having said that such matters should be left well alone, proceeds to talk at length about astronomy and rival theories. Normally the device is coolly, almost cynically employed so that the listeners can as it were be surprised by information when their guard is down; the initial disclaimer is disingenuous. But Raphael's *occupatio* is not rhetorically controlled in this way. We sense that he just can't help being interested in these things, as Adam is. No doubt other factors

are at work. Milton must have been aware that, whatever the angel said, it had to be right and that his great, cosmic poem would look especially foolish to later ages if he backed the wrong horse. This anxiety will work, of course, on the side of curbing Adam's questions. But at the same time Milton himself wants to show off and is as keenly interested in the new astronomy as the others are. At the end of his speech Raphael says,

> Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid,
> Leave them to God above, him serve and fear
> heaven is for thee too high
> . . . . . .
> To know what passes there; be lowly wise:
> Think only what concerns thee and thy being;
> Dream not of other worlds . . .
>
> (viii. 167–8 , 172–5)

The instruction to be content with one's station, with an unquestioning passivity, is reminiscent of the notoriously numbing conclusion of Milton's Sonnet xvi, 'When I consider how my light is spent'. There the poet complains, like Job, against a God who who gave him the talent of poetry—and the whole point of the parable of the talents in Scripture is that certain of God's gifts carry with them an obligation upon the recipient to make the gift grow, to exercise initiative—and thereupon denies him the means of developing it, by taking away his eyes. But the poem ends on a note of acceptance: 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' In the words of the angel in *Paradise Lost* the notion of 'fear' (viii. 168) is added to the ideal of modest service. Adam pronounces himself entirely satisfied. God has taught the way to live unmolested by cares; it is man only who is prone to seek out such anxiety 'with wandering thoughts and notions vain' (viii. 187). Then (as if Adam is momentarily excited by his own phrase, 'wandering thoughts') we come to a sentence beginning with the word 'but'. We wonder if, after all, Adam is going to fight back. In fact he swiftly represses his own incipient doubt:

> But apt the mind or fancy is to rove
> Unchecked, and of her roving is no end;
> Till warned, or by experience taught, she learn,
> That not to know at large of things remote

> From use, obscure and subtle, but to know
> That which before us lies in daily life,
> Is the prime wisdom, what is more, is fume,
> Or emptiness, or fond impertinence . . .
>
> (viii. 188–95)

It is quite skilfully done. Adam withdraws from the field of the new science but Milton enables him to cover his retreat with a philosophy which was just as new and almost as exciting as Copernican science: the hostility of such seventeenth-century Nominalists as Hobbes to 'empty metaphysics'. In the following century, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, a conscious rewriting of *Paradise Lost* (written, as he says, to 'vindicate the ways of God to Man', i. 16), loudly professes a positivist epistemological humility:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.
>
> (ii. 1–2)

But everyone knows how Pope failed to obey his own behest, how he chose instead to range freely over the entire Chain of Being, so that *An Essay on Man* turns out, in the end, to be an Essay on God. If Pope's appetite for speculation, for wandering in thought beyond the limits of time and space, was too strong for his thesis, how much harder will it be for Milton, whose intellectual hunger was so much greater than Pope's, to brook confinement? Within the speech of gentle prohibition the angel himself proves disobedient, dwelling with evident delight on 'impertinent' matters. Meanwhile *Paradise Lost* itself is almost entirely concerned with worlds beyond our immediate comprehension.

Much earlier in the poem the fundamental challenge has been put: 'Can it be sin to know?' (iv. 517). At one time commentators had only to point to the fact that this question is asked by the serpent and it was discredited. This is no longer good enough. In like manner, it is a devil who says,

> for who would lose,
> Though full of pain this intellectual being,
> Those thoughts that wander through eternity . . .
>
> (ii. 146–8)

Remember, once more, the words of *Areopagitica*, where it is Milton himself who speaks of 'God' who 'gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit . . .' (*CPW*, vol. ii. p. 528). Adam, in conversation with a visiting angel, may contrive to agree with him that 'wandering thoughts' and unchecked 'roving' are folly (viii. 187, 189), but we know that the poet himself was stirred by such language. Before the poem is over Adam and Eve, newly astray in an unbounded landscape, grief-stricken, faltering, fallible and free to choose, suffer, and think, are told, by an angel, that they will be better off outside Paradise than they were inside (xii. 587).

The natural effect of the intermittently emergent narrative of naturalist *felix culpa* is to make us believe, gnostically, that the tree was true to its name and gave real knowledge of good and evil. *Areopagitica* virtually says as much, and if we lose our orthodox confidence that the prelapsarian life was absolutely higher we shall fall into full Gnosticism, whether we like it or not.

But Milton (let me say this as loudly as I can) was no unimpeded, second-century Ophite, willing to cut the knot by identifying the serpent with Christ. It is clear that all the ingrained habits of his mind and his imagination conspire to tell him that Satan must be wicked. He is in fact caught in a cleft stick. If God's goodness is saved by the fact that, in permitting the Fall, he really did mankind a good turn, if God can quite properly will the Fall because the Fall was fortunate, it would seem that the Devil was, as often in Calvinism, God's agent, working to bring about the great design. But Milton flinches from this thought. The consequent hesitation produces an extraordinary hiccough in the narrative. In spite of the fact that Genesis 3: 7, says unequivocally that 'the eyes of them both were opened', Milton refuses to allow that eating the fruit cleared their vision. Instead, drawing with poetic intensity on his own experience of blindness (cataract, *gutta serena*) he tells us that a film formed on their eyes. By the logic of the naturalist *felix culpa*, however, they need still to be brought to a point of clarified vision. This is achieved at xi. 412–14:

> Michael from Adam's eyes the film removed.
> Which that false fruit that promised clearer sight
> Had bred . . .

There are analogies in earlier epic poetry. Pallas clears the eyes of Diomedes at *Iliad*, v. 127 and Venus clears the eyes of Aeneas at *Aeneid*, ii. 604. There is also an analogous passage in the Apocrypha. In The Book of Tobit, Tobit, a just Jew who lived in the time of the Diaspora, is visited by misfortune. He is then blinded by birds defecating into his eyes: 'the sparrows muted warm dung into mine eyes, and a whiteness came in my eyes, and I went to the physicians but they helped me not' (2: 10). Raphael then comes to scale away the whiteness, to give a wife to Tobias, the son of Tobit, and to bind the evil spirit Asmodeus. Eyes are cleansed and a devil is tamed, but all this seems to have nothing to do with the sin of Adam and Eve. Milton needs an analogous moment within the narrative of Genesis and this he cannot find. The mythic force is strangely dissipated by Milton's addition to the story. We are asked to believe that the tree of knowledge gave ignorance, but for a little while only; then an angel (omitted by some oversight from the narrative of Genesis) gave them knowledge after all.

(v) Arianism, Monism, Materialism

One fundamental element in the Miltonic naturalist *felix culpa* which is deeply at variance with traditional Gnosticism is the fact that in *Paradise Lost* it is the Creator who wills the acquisition of knowledge. We therefore do not find in Milton's poem a Promethean Son, heroically antagonistic to the Father. Milton held Arian views about the Trinity; that is, he thought the Father both prior to and superior to the Son. Some, indeed, have energetically disputed this, claiming instead that Milton's theology is either 'Subordinationist' or even entirely orthodox.

In 1825 it seemed inescapable to Charles R. Sumner, the first editor and translator of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, who obviously wanted Milton to be orthodox, that the treatise bordered on Arianism: 'The opinions of Milton were in reality nearly Arian, ascribing to the Son as high a share of divinity as was compatible with the denial of his self-existence and co-essentiality with the Father.'[73] David Masson in his magisterial nineteenth-

[73] See John Milton, *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, trans. Charles R. Sumner (Cambridge: printed by Cambridge University Press for Charles Knight, 1825), p. xxxiv.

century *Life of John Milton* is forthright: 'His views about the nature of Christ . . . are expressly and emphatically those of high Arianism'.[74] With the twentieth century came heated controversy. Maurice Kelley, who wrote the commentary on *De Doctrina Christiana* in the Yale *Complete Prose Works,* continued to insist that Milton really was an Arian. Perhaps the most powerful counterblast to Kelley's view is *Bright Essence* (1971).[75] The three authors of this book, William B. Hunter Jr., C. A. Patrides, and J. H. Adamson argued for the greater appropriateness of a less vehemently heretical label, and chose 'Subordinationism'. Then Michael Bauman countered with his immensely detailed study, *Milton's Arianism* (1987).[76] Bauman provides a full account of the controversy with an excellent bibliography. He reasserts the view of Kelley, supporting his case with a series of clinching arguments.

In *Bright Essence* Hunter had claimed that Kelley had made a bad mistake: he had failed to see that, while indeed the Miltonic Father differs from the Son 'in essence', they are nevertheless 'co-substantial'.[77] This, Hunter thought, was enough to deflect the charge of Arianism. Bauman has little difficulty in showing that Hunter's argument is thoroughly confused. Hunter assumed that 'substance' (*substantia*) denotes the quality shared by all the persons of the Trinity in orthodox Christianity—the *homoousia* agreed by the Council of Nicea when it met in May 325, expressly to deal with the dissension raised by Arius, the original Arian. It is possible that Hunter was subconsciously influenced by the fact that 'substance' *is* used to translate *homoousion* (the accusative singular of the adjectival form of the word) in the most commonly used English translation of the Nicene Creed: 'Being of one substance with the Father'. In fact for Milton, as for others, it is 'essence' (*essentia*) which corresponds to *homoousia* or *ousia* and this at once places him on the Arian side in the dispute. Meanwhile in Miltonic theology 'substance' is something in which *all* created beings have a share, in so far as they are made from 'God-stuff'. In other words, Hunter has confused

74 7 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1881–94), vol. vi, p. 823.
75 Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
76 Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
77 Ibid., p. 17.

Milton's metaphysical materialism (to which we shall come, later in this chapter) with orthodox Trinitarianism. He also ignores Milton's 'repeated explicit denials of a multi-personal Godhead'.[78] At *DDC*, I. v, p. 212 Milton writes, 'God is one being, not two. One being has one essence . . .' A little later he cites 1 Corinthians 8: 6, 'There is but one God, the Father' and observes that the passage 'excludes not only a second essence, but any second person whatsoever' (*DDC* I. v, p. 216). A page later he cites Ephesians 4: 6, 'One God and Father of all' and concludes, 'It is quite clear that the Father alone is a self-existent God; clear, too, that a being who is not self-existent cannot be a God' (*DDC* I. v, p. 218). Moreover, Milton, exactly like Arius as anathematized by the bishops at Nicea, denies the co-eternity of the Son (*DDC* I. v, pp. 261–2). The orthodox view, note, is that the Son was not begotten at a particular point in a sequence, but is 'eternally begotten', that begetting being itself a necessary element in the divine nature.

Does Milton's Arianism show in *Paradise Lost*? C. A. Patrides, though prepared to find 'Subordinationism' in *De Doctrina Christiana*, believes that the poem is orthodox, placing great weight on iii. 305–7, where the Father describes the Son as

> throned in highest bliss
> Equal to God, and equally enjoying
> Godlike fruition . . .

The bishops of Nicea, one senses, could hardly be sure of their man on the strength of these lines. Full *homoousia* is certainly not unequivocally affirmed. Milton commits himself to saying only that the bliss and enjoyment will be equal, not that the Son's essence is timelessly equal to that of the Father. Patrides has in fact chosen a passage which does little for his cause. Two lines later we meet the words, 'By merit more than birthright Son of God' (iii. 309). These words are, precisely, Arian.[79]

The Christ we see in *Paradise Lost* is created at a certain

[78] *Milton's Arianism*, p. 83.

[79] See C. G. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, E. B. Speirs, J. Millar, and W. MacGilchrist, 7 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1894–9), vol. iv, p. 39.

moment by the Father. His status is then crucially changed by the Father. At iii. 317-18 we as readers are actually permitted to watch the Father *giving* power to the Son, within a sequence of events. The Son's nature is clearly not timeless as God's must be. Instead he grows and develops morally, as human beings may, though of course at a far higher level. In Book III the angels turn to the praise of the Son after they have praised the Father:

> of all creation first,
> Begotten Son, divine similitude
>
> (383–4)

Those who believe that *Paradise Lost* is orthodox may say, 'No problem here; Milton is echoing the words of Scripture: "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature" (Colossians 1: 15)'. That is true, but it is surely of some interest that the poet has chosen to allude to a passage which obviously embarrasses Nicene orthodoxy and (with its conflation of begetting with creation or making—two activities carefully separated in the Nicene Creed) provides the Arian with instant ammunition. Milton, entirely predictably, cites this text in *De Doctrina Christiana* and explains that the words 'can only mean that he was the first of the things which God created. How, then, can he be God himself?' (I. vii, p. 303).

Hunter argues that the only heretical Trinitarian opinions to be found in *Paradise Lost* are placed in the mouth of Satan.[80] But we have now seen that the angels look Arian and the Father is certainly Arian. What of unfallen man? At viii. 419–20 Adam remarks that God has no need to propagate because he is already infinite (compare *DDC* I. v, p. 209, 'He stands in no need of propagation'). This observation contradicts Nicene orthodoxy, according to which the Father is obliged by his very nature to beget the Son. Early in this book I suggested that the serpent in Genesis looks like a Gnostic and wondered briefly whether Jesus might have been one too. In *Paradise Lost* the Arianism looks general. It is, however, the

[80] See his 'The Heresies of Satan' in Amadeus P. Fiore (ed.), *Th'Upright Heart and Pure* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1967), pp. 25–34, esp. pp. 27–8.

narrative above all—the narrative of filial development and promotion—which impresses the Arian scheme upon the informed reader's imagination.

It is sometimes suggested that no one would have smelled Arianism in *Paradise Lost* if *De Doctrina Christiana* had remained unpublished. But, as Bauman has shown,[81] there was a chorus of voices complaining of heresy, long before anyone knew anything of the treatise. Charles Leslie, writing late in the seventeenth century, may serve as a representative figure:

> To make the Angels ignorant of the blessed Trinity; and to take it ill to acknowledge him for their King whom they had always ador'd as their God; or as if the Son had not been their King or had not been begotten until that day. The scheme of the Angels revolt cannot answer . . . to the eternal Generation of the Son . . .[82]

These people did not need the *De Doctrina Christiana*. They saw it at once.

This is the argument formally offered by Milton. It is undoubtedly heretical but the heresy is the opposite of that we found in Gnosticism. Instead of placing the Son above the father Milton has placed the Father above the Son. This indeed provides what we may think of as a philosophic base. But as the poem proceeds a shadowy theological antithesis begins to form—not the irenic unification of Nicene orthodoxy but, precisely, an *antithesis*, a counter-Arian scheme.

It is hard to detect in Milton's formal theology the kind of weakening we find in the virtual Arianism of say, Julian of Norwich. Julian, like Milton, made the Father superior to the Son but nevertheless has the Son return after the Incarnation wearing a garment more beautiful than that worn by the Father.[83] The nearest we come to a Son-against-the-tyrant scheme is at xi. 42, where the Son, *beginning* to dispute with the seemingly judgemental Father, offers a version of the Fortunate Fall as if it were very much his idea and not the

[81] *Milton's Arianism*, p. 279.

[82] From the preface to his *History of Sin and Heresy* (1698), repr. in John T. Shawcross (ed.), *Milton: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1970–2), vol. i, pp. 117–18.

[83] *Revelations of Divine Love: A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. E. Colledge and J. Walsh (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), p. 543.

Father's. He puts his point very mildly, as if he were to say in modern English, 'Please don't think I'm cancelling your excellent judgement—I'm merely softening it'.

> let him [Adam] live
> Before thee reconciled, at least his days
> Numbered, though sad, till death, his doom (which I
> To mitigate thus plead, not to reverse)
> To better life shall yield him, where with me
> All my redeemed may dwell in joy and bliss,
> Made one with me as I with thee am one.
>
> (xi. 38–44)

The last, very un-Arian line may well spring from an anxiety in the poet at the potential Gnostic polarization of Son and Father. Notice that here the Father (behind the nervously conciliatory language) is implicitly cast as the tyrant of Gnosticism. But the crisis never comes because Milton makes the Father himself will the Fortunate Fall. Instead of a rebellion in heaven of Son against Father, through which mankind is led out into the light of day, it is as if a second nature within the Creator usurps the power of the first, as if God, timelessly and in a wholly internal manner, has put down the tyrant and enthroned the lover of mankind: an invisible, un-narratable story. God himself makes the transition from static good to dynamic. When Adam and Eve did this it was called a fall. Did God fall first? Consider the lines of Baudelaire, the master of 'la poésie satanique':[84]

> Qu'est-ce que la chute?
> Si c'est l'unité devenu dualité, c'est Dieu qui a chuté
> En d'autres termes, la création ne serait-elle pas la chute de Dieu?[85]

Baudelaire's instinct is good when he pushes the argument back to the point of Creation. Augustine could almost agree with him. In his *De Diversis Quaestionibus* we find the strangely powerful argument that evil does not stem from the Fall but is inherent in the fact of creation. If God, at the start, is perfect and infinite, there is no room for addition, but only for subtraction. If God made something wholly good he would

[84] L. Petit de Julleville, *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature française*, 8 vols. (Paris: Armand Collin, 1897–1900), vol. viii, p. 30.

[85] *Journeaux intimes*, ed. J. Crepet and G. Blin (Paris: José Corti, 1949), p. 73.

merely be extending his own substance, but that which is already infinite cannot be further extended. Therefore in order to create he must make something other than himself, something imperfect: *Non essent omnia, aequalia si essent*, 'All things would never have existed, had all been equal'.[86] Milton, as we saw, believed that God created the world not from nothing but from himself. On this hypothesis we can infer that, at the Creation, parts of the divine matter fell into particularity and imperfection.

If we explained all this to an Ophitic Gnostic we might receive the excited answer, 'In that case the snake and the Creator are one!' Such a response would obviously be too much for Milton. This argument may begin to imply that Satan is not merely helping, inadvertently, to fulfil the divine plan but is actively working for God, but Milton will not say so.

Meanwhile, Blake would wish to remind us, there is the poetry. What does the poetry tell us? Certainly not everything on the poetic side operates to exalt Satan. The poetry gives us, among other things, a disgusting Satan, shrunk to the form of a toad dripping venom at the ear of Eve, a being who, resentful of his treatment at the hands of God, resolves to hurt someone smaller than himself. But then, with equal or perhaps greater strength, the poetry gives us one contending in the long run with an enemy far stronger than himself, gives us a Satan who launches himself, alone, upon an immense flight across Chaos, someone who like the good Aeneas (at *Aeneid*, i. 209) represses his own grief and fear so as not to dishearten his army (i. 126). Milton sought indeed to arrest the rising image of Satan as a brave Republican insurgent against the King of the Universe by presenting him, at the beginning of Book II, as an Oriental despot (compare 'sultan', at i. 348). Certainly something had to be done. The language given to Satan is exactly the kind of thing which seventeenth-century Republicans, friends of that Milton who in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* endorsed regicide, enjoyed:

> What though the field be lost?
> All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
> And study of revenge, immortal hate,
> And courage never to submit or yield . . .
> (i. 105–8)

[86] LXXXIII, q. xli, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xl, p. 27.

The reference to revenge and hate is experienced as a 'corrective' dislocation of the heroic tenor, an attempt to bridle a beast which otherwise might escape. It is entirely reasonable that theological Republicanism should cause Satan to rename his fellow fallen angels 'gods', in the plural. The monarchy of monotheism is something he would wish to end:

> A third part of the gods, in synod met
> Their deities to assert, who while they feel
> Vigour divine within them, can allow
> Omnipotence to none.
>
> (vi. 156-9)

God, before the strange internal motion to authorize the Fortunate Fall, is static; Satan is all fiery energy. C. S. Lewis thought that fighting against enormous odds rendered Satan absurd, comic. It is perfectly true that the same action may appear, from one point of view, ludicrous, from another, heroic. Which of these is backed by the poetry? Milton wrote in fetters when he essayed the comic version (for example at iii. 81) and at liberty when he permitted the heroic note to sound.

One wants to say that Milton's reason resisted the Gnostic promotion of Satan while his imagination intermittently allowed it. But that is not quite true. The facts are much stranger. The argument of the naturalist *felix culpa* is just that, an argument, properly the work of reason. That Satan assists crucially in the work of enlightenment is a *logical* inference from what we are told. We are on the brink of a great uniting of reason with imagination; what the heart had long been singing the head can now approve. What then is the impediment? Some will say, '*Right* reason'. Others will say, 'Dominant tradition' or 'Orthodoxy'.

The scheme I have described will certainly appear 'cranky' to many, the sort of thing one might find in the pages of a tormented nineteenth-century Russian like Dostoevsky, something just conceivable perhaps in a transgressive seventeenth century individualist like Milton, but inconceivable in the Middle Ages. Yet Hugh White has argued persuasively that the naturalist *felix culpa* is rather more clearly present in the fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman* of William Langland than it is in

Paradise Lost.[87] I have paused on the word 'wayfaring' in *Areopagitica* and linked it to Adam and Eve setting out on the great pilgrimage of uncertainty at the end of *Paradise Lost*. Journeying is similarly important in *Piers Plowman*.

> I wole bicome a pilgrym,
> And walken as wide as the world lasteth[88]
>
> (B Text, xx. 381–2)

These are the words of personified Conscience. White comments, 'It is one suspects a relief for Langland to be, as it were, on the road again . . . What is important is the act of journeying itself'.[89] The full doctrine of *Areopagitica* appears in Langland's Passus XVIII. When Peace opposes the claim of Righteousness and Truth that man is justly doomed to domination, we meet with the 'contextualist' notion that we cannot know good unless at the same time we know evil:

> For no wight woot what wele is, that nevere wo suffrede
> Forthi God, of his goodnesse, the first gome Adam,
> Sette hym in solace and in sovereyn murthe;
> And siththe he suffred hym synne, sorwe to feele—
> To wite what wele was kyndelich to know it.
>
> (B Text, xviii. 218-21)

Clearly this thought is not one which became suddenly available, with Romantic biolatry, in the late eighteenth century. It was there in the Middle Ages. I began this book by citing Lactantius on the problem of evil. His answer, easily offered, is that man could not have recognized Good had he not first recognized Evil.

Not all theodicies are Christian. Virgil gives us an elaborate theodicy in his first *Georgic*. There he tells the story not of the loss of Eden but of something very similar, the passing of the pastoral, innocent Golden Age. It is a desolating story but, as in Milton, out of the sadness there arises an unlooked-for energy, almost joy. It was Jupiter himself, the Father, who willed that life should not be easy for men (i. 122). He brought

[87] 'Langland, Milton, and the *Felix Culpa*', *Review of English Studies*, NS 55 (1994), pp. 336–56.

[88] Ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Longman, 1995), p. 740.

[89] 'Langland, Milton, and the *Felix Culpa*', p. 339.

danger into the world—put venom in the snakes (i. 129). From this fall came the hardness of the human race, arts and sciences, and Promethean cleverness, as men struck out the secret fire that hides in flint (i. 135). At the end of passage the note of sadness, of infinite regret still sounds in certain phrases and allusions, but for all that we have in the first *Georgic*, long before Milton, long indeed before Lactantius, a naturalist Fortunate Fall. Meanwhile the notion that virtue is essentially linked to hardship is a commonplace of Stoicism. In Lucan's *Bellum Civile* Cato's march across the desert forms the character of the true, wayfaring Stoic. He tells his soldiers to prepare *ad magnum virtutis opus summosque labores*, 'for the great work of virtue and utmost labour', since *Gaudet patientia duris*, 'Patience rejoices in difficulties' (ix. 381, 403).[90]

It will be obvious that we have turned Milton inside out, but at every stage in the process we have been able to cite Milton against Milton. Everyone knows, or used to know, that Milton was an Arian, placing the Father above the Son, rejecting the orthodox Trinity. Everyone knows that Milton rejected Calvinism, proposing instead that evil sprang entirely from human freedom and not from the will of God. Everyone knows that Milton had a 'Turkish' contempt for women (the word is Dr Johnson's). Everyone is not wrong. The Freudian principle that those who protest too much betray a contrary desire is never one that I have cared for, as a way of analysing human behaviour. It seems to allow the interpreter to make anything mean anything. But good readers of Milton know that some such principle obtains everywhere in his work. This great monist of theology, as Blake saw, is haunted at every step by an anti-self. His work is all temptations, from *Comus* to *Paradise Regained*, is for ever trembling on the brink of a catastrophic reversal. We begin almost to expect that Milton will find, as his anti-theology begins to form, that all his villains are turning into heroes. Eve's rebellion against her husband becomes a voyage of discovery, she leading, Adam following. At the point when Eve tempts Adam the poetry allows her to assume briefly the lineaments of the self-sacrificial Son of God:

[90] See Charles Martindale, *John Milton and the Transformation of Ancient Epic* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 222.

> Lest thou not tasting, different degree
> Disjoin us, and I then too late renounce
> Deity for thee . . .
>
> (ix. 885)

Jason P. Rosenblatt brilliantly observes, 'The Miltonic bard, allowing irony free play, has Eve declare that, if necessary, she will become mortal for love, undergoing a *kenosis* like Christ's'.[91] In his Epistle to the Romans (7: 1–6) Paul explains how through the body of Christ we are delivered from the dead letter of the Mosaic Law as a wife is liberated from the rule of her husband by the death of that husband. It is *per accidens* an oddly feminist-sounding allegory: Christianity seen as the freeing of woman from the law of man. Milton cites the passage at *De Doctrina Christiana*, I. xxvii, p. 526, but without warmth. Moreover, although in Eve's words to Adam the Miltonic misogyny is indeed marvellously altered, the change is not in the direction of Platonic transcendentalism, nor yet towards modern feminism. Nevertheless we may say, adapting the words of Blake, that Milton was a true poet and of the women's party without knowing it. Is Adam at his best or at his worst when he calls her 'adventurous Eve' at ix. 921? The word 'adventurous' is itself ambiguous, hanging between two extremes. Satan begins to blaze in the poem but the complete Ophite logic is withheld. Instead (with perhaps greater radical violence to orthodox theology) God himself extends his own nature, previously changeless, into the chiaroscuro of history and time, forging morality from the freedom of the creature. If Adam and Eve are promoted by the shift from static to dynamic, God likewise is promoted. If the Devil somehow embodies the dynamic principle (and the poetry certainly teaches this lesson, again and again), was God himself of the Devil's party without knowing it?

One way to reduce the knowledge attained by Adam and Eve to a lower status is to turn it into sexual knowledge. True to this tradition Adam and Eve experience lust after eating the apple (ix. 1013–15). The passage is very fine but its effect is blunted by Milton's earlier courage. Milton, against the massed

[91] *Torah and the Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 189.

weight of the commentators, chose to present Adam and Eve as having sexual intercourse before the Fall.[92] Notoriously, unfallen sexuality proved almost as difficult to imagine as the conversations which take place among the persons of the Trinity. Adam, unfallen, is excited by Eve's blushes, by her seeming reluctance ('sweet reluctant amorous delay', iv. 311). After such passages, postlapsarian lust scarcely arrives with an effect of shock or critical difference. It is curious that Michael's crucial phrase, 'a paradise within thee, happier far' (xii. 587) should be pre-echoed within the problematic context of Edenic sexuality. Adam and Eve, watched by Satan, are described as being

> Imparadised in one another's arms,
> The happier Eden . . .
> (iv. 506–7)

Is it possible that the poet is thinking already that this flawed, exciting love gives a foretaste of fallen, strenuous virtue? I cannot think so. But 'happier' remains a puzzling word. In the thirteenth century the Spanish–Jewish scholar Nahmanides (sometimes spelled 'Nachmanides') dissented from the view that the knowledge gained was sexual. There is something oddly pre-Romantic about his simultaneous assertion that it was a fall into real, discriminating wisdom and that such a fall constitutes a genuine descent because it is a departure from Nature. Man before the Fall used 'to do naturally what is fitting to do according to nature, as is done by the heavens and all their hosts . . . The fruit of this tree however, produced in those that ate it the will and desire to choose between a thing and its opposite.'[93] This was never Milton's line, although his friend Andrew Marvell came close to it, in that poem which so wittily deconstructs human wit itself, 'The Garden'. In Milton the fundamental movement is into knowledge, and Milton could never have preferred a static 'green thought' to active thinking and learning. Nor will he have anything to do with the 'soft transcendentalism', the facile ramifying metaphysics of the early Gnostics. The admission to the ranks of them that

[92] See James Grantham Turner, *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 37.

[93] *The Commentaries of Nahmanides on Genesis Chapters 1–6*, with a translation by Jacob Newman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), p. 69.

know, of the mage and the scientist, on the other hand, is congenial to him. Remember Galileo in the valley of the Arno, flying in thought through the night sky. We have seen how Henry Ainsworth in Milton's own century saw Satan as an acute empirical investigator, a kind of scientist, saying that the word 'subtle' in Genesis referred to '*subtill observation*, *search and finding out by experience*'.[94]

Milton, as we saw, stoutly resisted Zanchius's doctrine of the 'double will' of God (*DDC*, I. iv, p. 177), that is to say that the idea that, while God overtly willed that Pharaoh should let his people go, covertly he hardened Pharaoh's heart to prevent any such thing from happening.[95] As a good monist Milton insisted on the unity of God's moral purpose. But the story he has told in *Paradise Lost* is the story of a God who publicly forbade eating from the tree of knowledge, yet foresaw that Adam and Eve would eat and willed the glorious consequence (through the Fortunate Fall) of that eating. We have here either a simultaneous double will in God or a change in time of the divine nature. The root problem remains the same. It is as hard for Milton to link unchanging perfection to a sequence in time—a story—as it was for Descartes to link mind with body. The God–world problem pre-echoes the psycho-physical problem of modern philosophy.

It would seem that, if Adam and Eve are morally exalted at the moment when they become vulnerable, God, cloistered in omnipotence, remains locked in the old static morality. Blake wrote in *The Everlasting Gospel*,

> To be good only, is to be
> A God or else a Pharisee
> (Section f 28, E, pp. 521 and 880)

If, by the doctrine of *Areopagitica*, good is *essentially* contextual, so that good alone is not truly good, God's unshadowed perfection becomes at best an unintelligible mystery, at worst pharisaical rigidity. Blake in fact later altered his own line so that it read, 'A devil, or else a Pharisee'.[96] The Father can never

94 *Annotations on the V Books of Moses*, commentary on Book I, p. 14.

95 See above, p. 60.

96 See the note *ad loc.* in *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 1989), p. 860.

be brave because he is never endangered. There is now a beautiful extra dimension of strange altruism in God's gift of moral freedom. He is giving his creature something he can never attain for himself. One is reminded of those places in the Bible where one is instructed not to judge one's enemies. The Christian ethical ground of this instruction, operative for all human kind, is simply that love is in itself higher than judgement. But the theological rationale gives us a Jehovah still locked into the old retributivist ethic: 'Judge not'—why? 'That ye be not judged' (Matthew 7: 1). God is still doing that which would now count in man as sin, judging and punishing instead of loving and forgiving.

Milton is too intelligent for his own monism. There is something very Protestant about his way of opening with a brutal simplification—'Man was made free and there's an end on't'—and then continuing with increasingly subtle sophistications. Luther, as we saw, affirmed robustly that Christ despaired and then began to register the difficulties.[97] Milton's monism sounds like, and is, a brave thing, but again and again it is shot through with latent doubt. Milton's special version of the Theory of Accommodation is a good example of this. This is Milton's theory of the adaptation of the divine nature to human powers of understanding. It is an error to suppose that 'accommodation' is something done by poets, a mere matter of transposing spiritual truths into acceptable metaphors and images. It is in fact something done by God himself, to himself, in Holy Scripture. Milton writes,

> We ought not to imagine that God would have said anything or caused anything to be written about himself unless he intended that it should be part of our conception of him. On the question of what is or what is not suitable for God, let us ask for no more dependable authority than God himself. If Jehovah *repented that he had created man*, Gen.vi.6, *and repented because of their groanings*, Judges, ii.18, let us believe that he did repent. But let us not imagine that God's repentance arises from lack of foresight . . . (*DDC*, I. ii, p. 134)

The initial impression is of brisk common sense—scholastic cobwebs blown away. The schoolmen had taught that all our language about God is necessarily metaphorical. If we read

97 See the Weimar edn., vol. v, p. 602.

that God was angry we should tell ourselves that, because God is passionless, this is a metaphor only, 'from similitude of effect'. One can see why Milton felt that he had to fight this. If all our terms and all our concepts were metaphorical, obliquely conceived, we could not operate the metaphors, could not perceive their appropriateness; what was offered as a set of metaphors would break down into a wholly independent unconstrained set of mere fictions. That is why Bishop Berkeley in the eighteenth century insisted that there must be some terms which are literally applicable to God. ' "Wise" and "good" ', he said, 'must be applied in exactly the same sense to God and to man; Otherwise it is evident that every syllogism brought to prove those attributes, or (which is the same thing) to prove the being of God, will be found to consist of four terms and consequently can conclude nothing.'[98] Ordinary syllogisms have three terms; for example,

All good beings are generous
God is a good being
Therefore God is generous

Here there are three terms, 'good beings', 'God', and 'generous'. The logic is strong. A four-term syllogism on the other hand might run as follows:

All good beings are generous
God is good-in-a-unique-sense
Therefore God is generous.

Because 'good-in-a-unique-sense' has been inserted as an extra fourth term the conclusion no longer follows. Hence the need to say that at some point, as a minimum, we must be able to describe God literally.

Milton's route to literalness is apparently simple. God is the author of Holy Scripture. Therefore we may properly take Holy Scripture literally. If Scripture, God's text, says that God was angry, we should simply accept that he was. The authority of Scripture is already higher than any we could bring to bear in criticism.

[98] *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, iv. 22, in *The Works of George Berkeley*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Nelson, 1948–57), vol. iii, p. 171.

But the attentive reader will sense strain. Indeed it breaks out in the final qualification (which is philosophically or theologically induced): 'But let us not imagine that God's repentance arises from lack of foresight'. At once doubts begin to crowd in. Repentance without any element of inadvertence will simply mean that the act which is regretted had, all the more surely, the character of sin. Milton nevertheless endeavours to sustain the note of brisk, no-nonsense simplicity:

> If *he grieved in his heart*, Gen vi.6, and if, similarly, *his soul was grieved*, Judges x.16, let us believe that he did feel grief . . . If it is said that God, after working for six days, *rested and was refreshed*, Exod. xxxi.17, and if he *feared his enemy's displeasure*, Deut. xxxii.27, let us believe that it is not beneath God to feel what grief he does feel, to be refreshed by what refreshes him, and to fear what he does fear. (*DDC*, I. ii, p. 135)

The hortatory form, 'Let us believe', betrays much. Milton affirms that we can have no better source for our conception of God than that provided by Scripture. But if we really were confined to the scriptural conceptions, why would it ever occur to anyone to say that something called 'accommodation' had taken place? The Theory of Accommodation simultaneously denies and presupposes obliquity or metaphor in our descriptions of God. If we really took scriptural descriptions literally we would have to say (and of course Milton does say this) that God really grieves, fears, repents; God really is as he describes himself. But if that is so why does he need the adjustment directly implied by the term 'accommodation'? Here Milton falls into a sort of philosophical schizophrenia. At one point he writes with dogged determination, 'In short, God either is or is not really like he says he is. If he really is like this, why should we think otherwise? If he is not like this, on what authority do we contradict God?' (*DDC*, I. ii, p. 136). At another he has already written, a couple of pages before, 'God, as he really is, is far beyond man's imagination, let alone his understanding' (*DDC*, I. ii, p. 133). It is immediately after this that Milton explains his Theory of Accommodation, saying that in the Bible God is described 'not as he really is, but in such a way as will make him conceivable to us' (*DDC*, I. ii, p. 133). Such 'conceiving' seems hard to distinguish, suddenly, from mere

fiction. 'Let us believe' begins to turn, as we watch, into 'Let's pretend'.

Again we have a curious pre-echoing, in theological form, of modern philosophy. In our own century A. J. Ayer notoriously maintained that all meaningful sentences are either verifiable by the senses or else true analytically ('My sister is female' is an example of an analytic truth; there is no need to consult the senses: the sentence is true—and trivial—because 'female' is already built in as part of the meaning of the term 'sister'). After Ayer had made this observation it was noticed that the sentence in which the principle is enunciated is itself neither analytic nor verifiable by the senses. His attempt to exclude intellectually pretentious metaphysics turned out to be itself another piece of metaphysical discourse.

I am suggesting that in a certain sense the literalist theology of Milton and the Logical Positivism of Ayer are both *faux naïf*. The literalism sounds robust but is in a way hollow. This has a bearing on the kind of imagining we find in *Paradise Lost*. Samuel Johnson said that the cardinal difficulty of the poem lay in the fact that 'Immateriality supplied no images'.[99] In due course C. S. Lewis sternly rebuked Johnson for his ignorance.[100] Lewis had to concede that Milton himself has an angel speak of 'likening spiritual to corporeal forms' at v. 573. This Lewis thought was just a slip, and Milton himself seems to have been provoked to hesitation by his own words, since, a line later, he adds,

> though what if earth
> Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein
> Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?
>
> (v. 574–5)

For the rest we are indeed given a Neoplatonic ontology in which everything but the creator is material. Milton undoubtedly exhibits a marked taste for physicalism which can sometimes amount to a mannered brutalism, but for all that Lewis has simplified and over-clarified Milton's view of matter. As I argued in *Overheard by God*[101] one of the differences between

[99] 'Life of Milton', in his *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), vol. i, p. 184.

[100] *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 108.

[101] pp. 89–90.

the Aristotelian-Thomistic line of thinkers and the Neoplatonists is that the former party sees an abrupt discontinuity between matter and spirit while the latter party sees an exciting, mysterious continuum, or ladder. For us in the twentieth century light is unequivocally a physical phenomenon. For the Milton who wrote the invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost* light itself can shift from that which streams in at a window to 'effluence' (iii. 6) and then to God's own substance. Earth for Milton is not just heavier or more palpable than light, it is more fully material. Lewis's hard, binary division, immaterial Creator on the one hand and wholly material creation on the other, is false both to Miltonic doctrine and to the poetry. In Book V of *Paradise Lost* the angel explains to Adam how all things proceed from God 'and up to him return':

> more refined more spirituous and pure
> As nearer to him placed or nearer tending . . .
>
> (470, 475–6)

Here spirit is allowed to invade the upper reaches at least of matter. Meanwhile, at the other end of the scheme, God's status as pure spirit is in doubt. For Plato in the *Timaeus* matter, 'the mother and receptacle' (*metera kai hupodochen*) has existed from eternity and is radically other than the creator (51A; cf. 50D–E, 54A–B). Milton's God exists, at first, entirely alone. Because Milton thinks that creation is always creation-out-of-something, he decides that God must have made the world out of his own substance. In other words, God, a spiritual being, is the material cause of the universe.[102] Milton brazenly faces down this difficulty by observing, at first, that the alternative is even worse: 'But, you will say, body cannot emanate from spirit. My reply is, much less can it emanate from nothing' (*DDC*, I. vii, p. 309). Then, however, he suggests that some sort of corporeal power must already have been present in God before: 'not even God's virtue could have produced bodies out of nothing . . . unless there had been some bodily force in his own substance, for no one can give something he has not got' (*DDC*, I. vii, p. 309). As, for Augustine,

[102] See Fowler's note on v. 472, 'One first matter all'. See also *DDC*, I. vii, p. 308.

Adam and Eve must have been corrupt before the Fall, for corruption to 'arise' in Eden, so for Milton God must have been in some sense material before creation for matter to 'arise' from him. Earlier we likened the discontinuity between perfection and evil to the Cartesian discontinuity between mind and body. Now, in the space between the material and the immaterial, we have an analogy to the Cartesian problem which is closer still.

I suspect that at the deepest level Johnson was absolutely right. Immateriality indeed supplies no images. This lies behind both the strangely impeded poetry of God in *Paradise Lost* and the strained philosophizing of *De Doctrina Christiana*. But it is also true that the philosophical malaise can energize the poetry. Book VI is the book of the War in Heaven, the *Iliad* within the Christian epic. The armies of either side appear, majestically, in arms, 'rigid spears, and helmets thronged, and shields . . .' (vi. 83). Satan himself, like Ajax in Homer's poem, 'Came towering, armed in adamant and gold' (vi. 110). The physical clash of the contending armies is enormous, deafening:

> Michael bid sound
> The archangel trumpet; through the vast of heaven
> It sounded, and the faithful armies rung
> Hosanna to the highest: nor stood at gaze
> The adverse legions, nor less hideous joined
> The horrid shock: now storming fury rose,
> And clamour such as heard in heaven till now
> Was never, arms on armour clashing brayed
> Horrible discord, and the madding wheels
> Of brazen chariots raged . . .
>
> (vi. 202–11)

Such is the encounter of angelic substances.

But, though physical, they are not quite as we are:

> The sword
> Of Michael from the armoury of God
> Was given him tempered so, that neither keen
> Nor solid might resist that edge: it met
> The sword of Satan with steep force to smite
> Descending, and in half cut sheer, nor stayed,
> But with swift wheel reverse, deep entering shared
> All his right side; then Satan first knew pain,

> And writhed him to and fro convolved; so sore
> The griding sword with discontinuous wound
> Passed through him, but the ethereal substance closed
> Not long divisible, and from the gash
> A stream of nectarous humour issuing flowed
> Sanguine, such as celestial spirits may bleed,
> And all his armour stained ere while so bright.
>
> (vi. 320–34)

This in application to angelic hosts, is 'ultra-physical' writing and, because ultra-physical, unreal or theatrical. These angels resemble the grotesquely muscular giants painted by Giulio Romano in the Palazzo del Tè at Mantua. The bodies of the angels seem ponderously massive, but their substance is described as 'ethereal', their blood as 'nectarous'. We are brought back to the strange oscillation between weight and weightlessness in the description of Satan's shield (i. 283–90). Within a few lines we are told how these warriors cannot

> in their liquid texture mortal wound
> Receive, no more than can the fluid air:
> All heart they live, all head, all eye, all ear,
> All intellect, all sense, and as they please,
> They limb themselves, and colour, shape or size
> Assume, as likes them best, condense or rare . . .
>
> (vi. 348–53)

Miltonic angels 'morph' like computer graphics. Just as the superheroes of American comics cease to command our admiration (for John Smith to climb that skyscraper would be an act of courage; for Spider Man it is as easy as crossing the road), so these elastic angels who capriciously expand and contract, rarefy and condense, who cannot be seriously wounded, cease to engage our sympathies. They cannot, we begin to feel, really be fighting *with swords*. Surely a being who can dilate himself into a wind hardly needs a brazen chariot? They must be playing at war, playing at epic. Within this clamorous Titanism there lurks a potential absurdity seized accurately by Pope in the beautiful, flimsy Rosicrucian wars of *The Rape of the Lock*—

> Airy substance soon unites again
>
> (iii. 152)

Pope's poem is not straightforwardly mock-Miltonic because Pope has, in a manner, been anticipated by Milton. The seventeenth-century poet, without a glimmer of humour, has written his own imperfectly acknowledged mock-epic. Earlier still Virgil, the poet of the *Aeneid*, had delighted in the comparison of small things with great (*Eclogues*, i. 23), had shown, in the busy kingdom of the bees or of the ants, miniature versions of human war and law-giving (*Georgics*, iv. 154, 162–8; *Aeneid*, iv. 402). Milton counters Virgil's Lilliput with his own angelic Brobdingnag. Physicalist it may be, but it is not the unselfconscious physicalism of God calling out to Abraham near the beginning of the medieval Chester play, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (209). Milton's scene is exaggerated, strained, half-crazy. But he cannot allow it to become clearly ironic, to ripen into full, explicit mock-heroic. The weird but presumably sincere pneumatology, the philosophy which leads him to explain doggedly how angels excrete (v. 438) is reimagined in terms of a battle with shields, spears, and even gunpowder (vi. 477–91, 512–15). Since we know that angels can alter their own shapes, it is easy for us to begin to think that they have themselves performed this de-theologizing feat of assimilation to literary models, have turned themselves into contending gladiators, participants in a spectacle-war.

In any case where one party is omnipotent there can be no serious struggle. Lewis himself, the apologist of Miltonic physicalism, wrote, 'There is no war between Satan and Christ. There is a war between Satan and Michael and it is not so much won as stopped, by Divine intervention.'[103]

I fear now that I may have pushed the War in Heaven too far in the direction of parody. Read Book VI of *Paradise Lost* immediately after reading the *Iliad* and you will feel at once the gigantesque theatricality; read it after *The Rape of the Lock* and it will be felt as serious epic matter—though epic matter of an eerie kind. It is, after all, not enough to call Milton's literalism *faux naïf*. He endeavours to obey his own precept: 'Let us believe that God feels grief' and so on, and the result is a structure in which belief continues to be *willed* even after it has begun to break up, intellectually and imaginatively. The

[103] *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 131.

Miltonic will is a formidable thing. It ploughs on, somehow, after all else has failed.

I have suggested that Milton was prevented by the culture of his time from adopting the full Ophitic model of the wicked creator. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, however, he does actually consider this model. He rejects it of course, but the language in which this rejection is expressed is not a simple mirror-reflection of contemporary belief but has an accent of personal urgency:

> the many visible proofs, the fulfilment of many prophecies and the narration of many marvels have driven every nation to the belief that either God or some supreme evil power of unknown name presides over the affairs of men. But it is intolerable and incredible that evil should be stronger than good and should prove the supreme power. Therefore God exists. (*DDC* I. ii, p. 131)

This is Milton's refutation of Gnosticism. He does not explain why it is incredible on rational grounds that an evil being made the world. Indeed he seems almost to concede that the reasons—the 'many proofs'—are all against him. We believe him at once, however, when he tells us that the thought is 'intolerable' to him. One senses that theology is here made dependent upon the ethical will. We must will the good and at the same time we must will into existence the good Creator. Milton's sentence is a strange compound of active duty and terror. In the course of *Paradise Lost* this will-as-desire—the will that God should be good—finds a saving argument in will-as-freedom, imparted by God to his creatures, Lucifer, Adam, and Eve, enabling them to depart from the original will of God himself; but then, as that argument crumbles, the emphasis on divagation from the will of God is reduced: the root idea that God always willed the freedom of the creature ripens into a sense that God also wills the actual use made of that freedom, the un-paradising of Adam and Eve into a new, more dynamic, freedom. God now rejoices in the new dynamism. Thus 'willing that God should be good' starts a sequence which terminates in God's acknowledgement of—almost submission to—the higher good of human, vulnerable willing. The logically frail, inwardly urgent wish that God be good undergoes a series of transformations in *Paradise Lost* ending in the naturalist *felix*

culpa, that truly moral freedom for the sake of which all was allowed to happen. Wishing, or willing, a trivial or accidental efficient cause, becomes a final cause, beckoning to God from a further horizon. The process is half-rational, half-imaginative. The word 'will' used in so many different senses in succession is subjected, it might be said, to a particularly violent philosophical abuse.

Within *Paradise Lost* the doors between the lighted rooms of heaven and the darkened chambers of devilry swing to and fro unlocked. The argument of *Areopagitica* that virtue is real only when brought into contact with evil is put with equal force by the unfallen Eve and the fallen Lucifer. God the Father thinks aloud about foreknowledge and freedom. So did Milton in *De Doctrina Christiana*. So do the devils:

> Others apart sat on a hill retired,
> In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
> Of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,
> Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute,
> And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.
>
> (ii. 557–61)

The 'burning marl' of hell seems half-forgotten. The whole place begins to feel more like the further, happier end of Virgil's Underworld in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the Elysian Fields. Here too, in *Paradise Lost*, we have poetry (ii. 548), athletic games (ii. 530), and, now, philosophizing. 'Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy', Milton shouts at ii. 565, but, turn it about as we will, his description of the Devil's discussion looks very like a description of the prolonged intellectual engagement of Milton himself.

All the boundaries so bravely set up break down: that between matter and spirit, God's omnipotent will and man's fallible freedom, God and Satan, the 'adversary' who plays a crucial part in the Fortunate Fall. Milton began from a detestation of Calvin's view that God was the author of evil, since everything that happens happens by his will. But as he comes to think of evil as inextricably involved with the great metagood of moral energy, to view God more and more as willing that very exercise of freedom which had seemed at first opposite to the will of God, he moves a little closer to the Calvinist

conception of God as operating everywhere, upon all things. It was not only in the early work, the *Areopagitica*, that Milton argued that virtue needed evil. In *De Doctrina Christiana* he wrote, 'Where does virtue shine, where is it exercised, if not in evil?' (I. x, p. 353). It will be said that the great remaining difference is that Calvin saw the human condition as unalleviated blackness; there is in his writings no redemption of evil through the principle of energy. Yet Calvinism (against the wishes of Calvin) lent itself to such a revision. Calvin taught that good works had nothing to do with salvation. Antinomianism, the belief that moral laws no longer apply, follows naturally from this teaching. Calvin fiercely condemned the libertine Antinomians of his own day but it is no mere sophistry to suggest that they were better Calvinists than he. Antinomian Calvinism can easily join hands with antinomian Gnosticism. Hans Jonas defined the first phase of 'negative libertinism' in Gnosticism as stemming from the intuition that, because truth is transcendent, what we do here does not matter.[104] 'But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful unto me' (1 Corinthians 6: 11–12) In the Gnostic *Hermetica* we read that those who have knowledge are already divine: they 'become God'.[105]

God is saved, or else, to use Milton's word, is 'justified', through an assimilation of evil to good under the flag of energy, by making him will all these things. The tendency is now towards a Ranterish pantheism. In *De Doctrina Christiana* Milton affirms un-Platonically, that 'the original matter was not an evil thing, nor to be thought of as worthless: it was good, and it contained the seeds of subsequent good' (I. vii, p. 308). Here the base dross which troubled the work of the Creator in the *Timaeus* is pronounced good. The light shines here also. At the very beginning of *De Doctrina Christiana* Milton says that God is everywhere, but then grows nervous: 'Our ideas about the omnipresence of God, as it is called, should be such as only appear most reconcilable with

104 *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 273.

105 *Poimandres*, 26, in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 458. See also Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition*, p. 646.

the reverence we ought to have for him'. Kelley is surely right when he suggests (*DDC*, I. ii., pp. 144–5 n.) that Milton had in mind the (very Blakean) perilous thoughts which Episcopius (otherwise known as Simon Bischop), the Dutch systematizer of Arian theology, had warned against:

> For instance, if God is thus immense, he is not less completely present in the devils and hell than in the angels and heaven; the devils are no less partakers of divine glory than the angels, and the blessedness, which is the fruition of the divine glory, is no less present in hell than in heaven; and if God is immense, then it is necessary that he be in all things created by him, even all things done by man.[106]

Yet again one is reminded of Descartes. This time we think of his notorious argument against the existence of a pure vacuum in *The Principles of Philosophy*: a vacuum in the sense of 'nothing' cannot exist: 'two bodies must touch when there is nothing between them'.[107] The argument is not quite as mad as it sounds because of Descartes's identification of matter with 'extension', a word which hangs between substance and space. It is an ambivalence with a long history. A. E. Taylor, commenting on the *hupodochê*, 'receptacle' which precedes creation in Plato's *Timaeus* (51A) which I described earlier in this book as a kind of prime matter, finds reasons for considering it rather as a '*matrix*' or as '*place* . . . agitated everywhere by irregular disturbances'.[108] In the slippery ontology of the seventeenth century, seemingly austere disquisitions on physics can turn, under one's hand, into mystical theology. Newton annoyed Leibniz by saying that space was 'the boundless, uniform sensorium of God', in which, because he is 'in all places' he is able to move bodies by his will.[109] Early in the following century Joseph Addison compared Newton's 'sensorium' with the Platonic 'receptacle' and preferred Newton's conception on the ground that it permits the divine intelligence to irradiate the medium, infinite space giving 'an Organ to

[106] *Institutiones*, IV. ii. 13, *Opera Theologica* (Amsterdam: J. Blaev, 1650), vol. i, p. 294. The translation is Kelley's.

[107] *Principles*, II. xvii, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), vol. i, p. 263.

[108] *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 457.

[109] *Opticks*, III. i (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), p. 403.

Omniscience'.[110] Milton similarly irradiated Platonic matter with the active virtue of God. When the notion of God as efficient cause of all things merges with the notion of God as material cause, the drive towards pantheism is almost irresistible. Behind all this we have the thesis of the unreality of evil: 'All entity is good: nonentity not good' (*DDC*, I. vii, p. 310) can easily generate the Popean 'Whatever is, is right' (*An Essay on Man*, i. 294). It might seem that we have now lost the exciting chiaroscuro of the naturalist *felix culpa* by turning everything into a uniform blaze of tedious light. But this effect is held at bay in Milton's thought by the vivid sense of a meta-ethical dimension. The good of the *felix culpa* is a *mysterious* good dependent for its very existence on the prior existence of ordinary good and evil. In like manner, God's 'willing' of freedom in the creature appears as a 'meta-will' when set beside his more ordinary 'willing' that the Israelite be freed from Egyptian domination.

(vi) The Invisible Christ

Milton's Arianism remains. Milton himself proposed an 'alternative Trinity', but it is the exact opposite of that elevation of the Son above the Father–Creator which I have been pressing. He says it is mere idiocy to suppose that God can be three and one at the same time; God is one and the Father is that one (*DDC*, I. v, p. 212). He finds his way to the text which is hardest of all for orthodox Trinitarians, that cry of dereliction which we heard behind the words of Faustus at the end of Marlowe's play: 'How can we believe that the Son is essentially one and equal with the Father? On the cross he cried out, Matt. xxvii. 46, My God my God, why have you forsaken me?' (*DDC*, I. v, p. 270) There is very little in *De Doctrina Christiana* about Christ as the proper site of love or of self-abnegation. Reading *Paradise Lost*, the greatest English theodicy, we may wonder that the poet, confronted with what becomes an unappeasable problem of pain, did not make vivid God's own submission to the worst of such pain. Given the

[110] *The Spectator*, 565 (July 1714), ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. iv, p. 532.

crucifixion we may think that at least we are no longer troubled by any sense of a complacent, impassible God. He has not asked anyone to undergo what he would not undergo himself. If we contemplate the agony of Christ on the cross we may find in that contemplation a palliative to our resentment, but philosophers will warn us not to pretend that it resolves the principal problem. A truly omnipotent God is not obliged for example to 'buy off' the Devil by a primitive bargain.[111] Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo?* accordingly introduced a profound modification: sin is an infinite offence against God; divine justice requires an infinite satisfaction; this God alone can pay; to satisfy his own requirement of justice, he pays by humiliation on the cross.

The pattern begins to look familiar. The seeming affront to God's omnipotence is met by making God, after all, the cause of all that happens. In the Fortunate Fall of *Paradise Lost* God, not Satan, unparadised our first parents. In the Anselmian Atonement God, not Satan, crucified God. But, it might be said, the primitive element survives in the Anselmian revision. Surely a developed ethical justice would hardly be satisfied by payment from the guiltless party? There is moreover an eerie touch of obsessive schizophrenia in the idea of a being who imposes on himself such sub-ethical, mathematical rules; Wittgenstein would say that such solipsistic rule-making and rule-observance is necessarily unreal, a kind of game. Anselm is strong on the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and I have therefore striven, so far, to express his theology of Atonement in terms of the single, triune God. But, notice, the idea of schizophrenia—of a split in the mind of God—has already crept in. If we allow an answering schism in the very nature of the Godhead, we can re-express the Anselmian Atonement as a tense negotiation between (very different) persons, a God of humanity sacrificing himself to meet the requirements of a God of justice, watchful of his 'honour'. Anselm himself expresses his theory in both these ways; on a single page he writes, first, 'He offered Himself to Himself' and then, a little later, 'The

[111] For the traditional view of the Atonement as a debt paid to the Devil, see e.g. Origen, *Commentaria in Matthaeum*, xiii. 8, 9, in Migne, *Patrologia* (*Series Graeca*), vol. xiii, p. 1115.

Son freely offered Himself to the Father'.[112] Thus the queer combination of terror and frivolity that we found in the charade of Omnipotence 'paying off' a less-than-omnipotent Satan reappears in a more acute form as God 'paying off' himself.

Paradise Lost is an almost 'cross-less' theodicy: a justification of God which forbears to use the most moving instance of God's involvement with pain. I have said 'almost' because there is one point[113] in the poem where Milton relaxes the policy of exclusion: Adam, like our reader of epic earlier, looks for a great fight between God and the Devil and is instructed (just as we had to instruct ourselves) that there will be no war:

> Dream not of their fight
> As of a duel, or the local wounds
> Of head or heel: not therefore joins the Son
> Manhood to Godhead, with more strength to foil
> Thy enemy; nor so is overcome
> Satan, whose fall from heaven, a deadlier bruise,
> Disabled not to give thee thy death's wound:
> Which he, who comes thy saviour, shall recure,
> Not by destroying Satan, but his works
> In thee and in thy seed: nor can this be,
> But by fulfilling that which thou didst want,
> Obedience to the law of God, imposed
> On penalty of death, and suffering death,
> The penalty to thy transgression due,
> And due to theirs which out of thine will grow:
> So only can high justice rest apaid.
> The law of God exact he shall fulfil
> Both by obedience and by love, though love
> Alone fulfil the law; thy punishment
> He shall endure by coming in the flesh
> To a reproachful life and cursed death,
> Proclaiming life to all who shall believe
> In his redemption, and that his obedience

[112] *Cur Deus Homo?*, II. xviii (II. xix in Migne's numbering), in *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson, 4 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1974–6), vol. iii, p. 133; in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. clviii, p. 428. For Anselm's recurrent reference to 'honour' see esp. ibid. I. xiii, xiv, xv: in Hopkins and Richardson, vol. iii, pp. 70–4, in Migne, vol. xlviii, pp. 378–81.

[113] I should add that there is a loose anticipatory reference to the crucifixion at iii. 236–40.

> Imputed becomes theirs by faith, his merits
> To save them, not their own, though legal works.
> For this he shall live hated, be blasphemed,
> Seized on by force, judged, and to death condemned
> A shameful and accurst, nailed to the cross
> By his own nation, slain for bringing life;
> But to the cross he nails thy enemies,
> The law that is against thee and the sins
> Of all mankind, with him there crucified,
> Never to hurt them more who rightly trust
> In this his satisfaction; so he dies
> But soon revives, Death over him no power
> Shall long usurp; ere the third dawning light
> Return, the stars of morn shall see him rise . . .
>
> (xii. 386–422)

The fundamental doctrine is thoroughly Anselmian. God is pleasing himself, not Satan. 'The penalty to thy transgression due' is paid, incongruously, by the Son: 'So only can high justice rest apaid'. If we admit Milton's Arianism here the sense that God who made the pain endures the pain, still present in Anselm's version, is further weakened or, perhaps, removed outright. This God lets his Son, another person, pay the debt. The main tenor of the passage, however, remains, as Charles Martindale says, 'almost brutally insensitive'.[114] 'So he dies | But soon revives' is neatly—too neatly—stretched metrically between two lines. For once Milton sounds almost as unforgivably sprightly as Pope. Meanwhile we may further sense the potential opposition between the tyrannical Father and the loving Son which haunted first the Ranters and later Blake. But Milton is not writing here with the propulsive energy of the Fortunate Fall. That the direction of his thought is, on the contrary, retrograde is shown by the admission, the more startling since Milton was a courageous critic of Calvin, of the Calvinist doctrine of imputed merit:

> his obedience
> Imputed becomes theirs by faith, his merits
> To save them, not their own, though legal works.
>
> (xii. 408–10)

[114] *John Milton and the Transformation of Ancient Epic*, p. 182.

Just as in Anselm's scheme the guilt is assumed by God, so in Calvin's the merits are assumed by the guilty. All this is done in the name of divine justice. Although when Milton makes his move into the Fortunate Fall, we may say that the way God stands behind the expulsion of Adam and Eve in Milton is analogous to the way God stands behind the crucifixion in Anselm, there is of course a great difference. Milton's move dynamizes the previously static deity; he ends the long tautology of God by causing him suddenly to will freedom, difficulty, patience, and courage in the creature. Anselm for his part rather erased the seeming humiliation of Christ by relocating it within the original scheme of mathematical justice and symmetry.

In these lines Milton is still Anselmian. That is why the seeming transition to epic, poetic values like heroism rings hollow here. It may seem indeed that the savage triumphalism of 'to the cross he nails thy enemies' (xii. 415) after all gives Adam the true note of battle he originally desired and at the same time gives the reader of Milton's epic the Achillean *aristeia*, 'display of prowess', required by the literary form. But this is not the threatened courage of the naturalist *felix culpa*; it is the original, unendangered omnipotence, reasserted, and Charles Martindale was right to recoil from the tone of these lines. The Son is here fulfilling the positive will of the Father; there is no hint of progressive *gnosis*.

Why does not the *felix culpa* produce in Milton what it produced elsewhere, the elevation of the Son over the tyrannical Father? The answer is: not so much because Milton was too entrenched in Arianism to countenance the proposition (after all, his professed theology turned itself completely inside out at other points) but rather because he simply overleaps Christ, elevates Adam, Eve, and Lucifer, and makes the Father himself will the dynamic conclusion. It is also important to remember that the original Arian controversy was about ontology, not morality, about the inner nature and being of God; within this ontology change will always be seen as less than divine. But the promotion of God from He-who-forbids to He-who-wills-an-enlarged-freedom is ethically rather than ontologically motivated. At Nicea all the disputants accepted (as Milton in his formal theology accepted) that the true God cannot be subject to

change. Michael Bauman supposed, entirely correctly, that, if he could show that Milton's Christ develops, he would *ipso facto* have shown that Milton's Christ is not fully divine. But before the poem has ended the torch of dynamic virtue, passed to Adam by a bitter and resentful Lucifer, has been handed on to God himself. The Father propagates after all—a version of himself who can learn and can love after a different manner.

There is one strange exchange between Gabriel and Satan where Gabriel, in a bluff angel-to-angel fashion, seems to concede that they are both alike fired by divine energy:

> Satan, I know thy strength and thou know'st mine,
> Neither our own but given; what folly then
> To boast what arms can do, since thine no more
> Than heaven permits, nor mine . . .
>
> (iv. 1006–9)

Gabriel immediately adds that his strength has now been made far greater than Satan's and we are free to think that, if God gave Satan strength, Satan is now misdirecting that strength. But the radical ontology—all entity is good, is of God—is also working in this passage. As with the War in Heaven we begin to feel that we are watching a play, permitted or commanded by God, who is directing, producing, and paying for the whole thing (and therefore needs a villain quite as much as he needs a hero).

The point in the Ophite heresy at which the serpent becomes Christ because he led Adam and Eve to knowledge is represented in Milton's poem by the point at which the Father turns out to have wanted Adam and Eve to attain, through falling, knowledge of good with evil (in which process Satan played a necessary—but unemphasized—part). We have seen how this implies a change in the nature of God, the Father. I have said that God has put down the tyrant in his own nature and has enthroned the lover of mankind. We may now put the same point as it would be expressed by a mythographer. The tyrannical Jahweh *generates*, mysteriously, a second self, who wills all that the tyrant forbade. Here, if you like, is the alternative Trinity we have been seeking. For the new God who emerges at the end of *Paradise Lost* is begotten of the Father, the tyrant. Here is the propulsive figure we needed, the true Son, the real Christ.

In medieval typology Adam, the first man, is made analogical to Christ, the Son of God; in Gnosticism we find a more radical mobility in the terms 'first man', 'Son of God'. In the Apocryphon of John Adam precedes the world-creation by the Demiurge. The Demiurge in ignorant folly claims to be the sole God and at once a voice is heard crying in heaven, 'The human being exists and is the child of the human being'.[115] Adam is later relegated to the world of matter.[116] 'Epinoia', translated by Bentley Layton as 'Afterthought', acts as a kind of divine saviour in the story and is identified with the tree of knowledge. There is a parallel passage in Irenaeus's account of Gnostic heresy: he tells how Ialdabaoth, the tyrant creator, boasts of his supremacy and hears a voice saying 'You lie, Ialdabaoth for above thee is the father of all things, the first man and Man the Son of Man.'[117] In the Apocryphon of John when Adam eats the apple he becomes aware of his real superiority to the Demiurge–Creator.[118] In the Hermetical *Poimandres* the archetypal human being, seeing the works of the Demiurge, wishes also to create and is allowed to do so.[119] In the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, also known as the Egyptian Gospel, originally written in Greek about AD 350 but now surviving in Coptic, Adam is called 'the first human being because of whom are all things' and is identified with the 'divine self-originate Word'.[120] Andrew Welburn has suggested that in the Genesis narrative, while the main act of creation belongs to Jahweh/Jehovah, we have a shadow of the story of 'first man' as creator: 'Adam's naming of the beasts remains a perplexing vestige of the man who speaks for the assembled community as maker of their world, reciting the words of power, and himself transfigured by the story he tells'.[121] Pleroma falls into the lower world, God lapses into intelligence and creation, Adam falls into matter and then by knowledge either falls once more or is raised; even within the Christian tradition the Incarnation is a deliberate fall on the part of God, a loving act of identification with our own fall. And all these falls are liable to be reconstrued as glorious.

115 See Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 39. 116 Ibid., p. 44.
117 *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxx. 6, ed. Rousseau, vol. i, p. 370.
118 Layton, p. 44. See also Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 114.
119 Layton, p. 454. 120 Ibid., p. 109.
121 'The Gnostic Imagination of William Blake' (unpub. typescript), fo. 50.

The various citations I have just offered appear to corroborate that special assertion of the Son over the Father with which this book has been concerned. But the endlessly ramifying genealogies of Gnosticism tend here to blur the issue. According to the account given by Irenaeus, Christ is the issue of a union between both 'First Man' and 'Second Man' on the one hand and 'the Mother' on the other.[122] Ialdabaoth, who corresponds to the jealous God of the Old Testament is, however, still to come in this story. Thus he is still posterior to Christ but Christ is posterior to the First Man, Son of God. All is not quite as unmanageable as it may seem. The downgrading of Christ in relation to an earlier, invisible Son of God actually resembles the structure which begins to emerge in *Paradise Lost*, whereby Jesus becomes a minor figure once we become aware that God himself has generated a second self in a manner which Jesus shows no sign of understanding.

In *Paradise Lost* the figure named as Christ is locked into an Anselmian orthodoxy which has less and less to do with the deepest impulse of the poem. The figure who was crucified and thereupon in his turn nailed his enemy to the cross belongs to the old theology. The strained clamour of his triumph begins to sound distant, unimportant, not our business, like shouting heard in another room.

In deriving the Miltonic dynamic theology from a philosophical matrix—Arianism—which seems opposed to any such doctrine, we are repeating in miniature what we have done on a larger scale with Gnosticism itself. Manichaean Gnosticism is the doctrine which teaches us to despise this radically fallen world, not to set out bravely, as Adam and Eve do at last, into its quickening half-light. Yet Mani himself, the eponymous founder of the movement, was as famous as a painter as Satan was as a poet. His manuscripts were exquisitely illuminated. He is said to have painted his vision on the walls of a cave. Even if, as Andrew Welburn conjectures, the cave in the story is pure symbol and signifies Mani's own inwardness, we shall still feel a sense, strengthened by memories of Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Republic* (514–17), that human kind is deeply—perhaps delightedly—involved in the polychrome world into

[122] *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxx. 1, 2, ed. Rousseau, vol. i, pp. 364–6.

which it has fallen. 'Mani' in Persian actually means 'painter'.[123] After all, Sethian Gnosticism in its first phase teaches that God's movement into knowledge is a descent but, as we saw, Gnostics would hardly be known as Gnostics if they had not rapidly come to a place a high value on knowing.[124] Just as William Blake can sound austerely transcendentalist when he despises, in equal measure, the matter of Newtonian physics and the Nature of Wordsworthian poetry (preferring imagination, spirit, vision) and yet at the same time celebrate the beauty of the sexual organs (*MHH*, Plate 10, E, p. 37) so Gnosticism, centuries earlier, despised the body and invented libertine theology. There is a place in the *Confessions* where Augustine, looking back on the period in his life when he followed the teachings of the Manichaeans, tells us that he saw the Good as a Monad, 'as if it had been a soul without sex', while Evil, he supposed—deeds of violence, passion, lust—sprang from 'the Dyad', from duality.[125] Already, in this historically remote, allusive summary of views Augustine came to detest, the supposedly condemned antithetical Dyad is beginning to assume a Blakean glamour: 'The Tigers of wrath are wiser than the Horses of Instruction' (*MHH*, Plate 9, E, p. 36).

Certainly there is a strand in Gnosticism which continually emphasizes the transcendent at the expense of the immanent. This produces the habit, noted by Paul A. Cantor, of elaborating myths not by adding extra material at the end but rather by extending their beginnings, further and further back. For this book, such backward-flying Gnosticism has not been the important thing. Rather it has been the propulsive, curious, disruptive Gnosticism which has concerned us. I suspect that Milton, too, was mildly repelled by backward-looking Gnosticism: 'Anyone who asks what God did before the Creation is a fool' he writes, at one stroke cutting away huge tracts of Gnostic mythology (*DDC*, I. vii, p. 299). Meanwhile, however, although he could never acknowledge the fact, his

[123] See Welburn, 'The Gnostic Imagination of William Blake', appendix, fos. A30 and A36.

[124] See above, p. 50. See also Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 66.

[125] IV. xv. 24, in *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, with an English translation by William Watts Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1988–9), vol. i, p. 190.

mind is already attracted by certain features of Ophite Gnosticism. There is one possible exception, one weakening in the direction of pre-Creation aetiologies. In the invocation to Book VII of *Paradise Lost* Milton invokes Urania, the heavenly Muse, and says,

> Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,
> Thou with eternal wisdom didst converse,
> Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
> In presence of the almighty Father, pleased
> With thy celestial song.
>
> (vii. 8–12)

To be sure the poet could at this point refer us to the Bible. In Proverbs Wisdom speaks:

> The Lord possessed me, in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there. (8: 22-7)

It is almost as if God had a daughter or even two daughters before he had a son—certainly before heaven was made. Fowler in his note[126] attempts to bridge the potentially embarrassing gap by saying that in Milton's scheme Wisdom actually *is* the Son, or Logos. Meanwhile the change of sex ('sister', 10) remains startling. Fowler himself concedes that Milton rejected the identification of Wisdom with Christ at *De Doctrina Christiana*, I. vii (p. 304). There Milton briskly dissolves Wisdom into a poetic personification. In the invocation to Book VII, however, he is clear that Urania is more than a *façon de parler*: 'The meaning not the name I call' (vii. 5). Having expressly drawn us away from the merely metaphorical, Milton seeks to drive home the reality of Urania by telling us that she was sister to eternal Wisdom and conversed with her before the creation of the hills. This daughter of God, friend

[126] *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 1980), p. 775. See also Stevie Davies, *The Feminine Reclaimed: The Idea of Woman in Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), p. 221.

and sister of the Muse who visits the poet's dreams, begins to look less and less like Christ. Fowler further concedes that all this in some degree suggests the Wisdom of the Platonists. Be that as it may, Milton may have been thinking not just of Proverbs 8, but of the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, where Wisdom is 'more beautiful than the sun' (7: 29) and so easily linked to the Sophia of Bruno's *Oratio Valedictoria* and even to the Helena/Wisdom figure of the Gnostics.[127] Even here, however, where Milton does seem to be drawn into the pre-Creationism of the Gnostics, what actually moves him is the sense of a living presence working within his own experience of poetic creation. As for the Son of God, the Christ we see in *Paradise Lost* is a mere Arian subordinate, effectively cowed by his punitive Father. The Christ we do not see, the new lover of freedom, knowledge, and imperfect humanity, is strong enough to turn the poem inside out, strong enough to displace the Father.

(vii) The Language of Trees: Unstable Mythologies

I have tried to tell the story of the transition from a static to a dynamic conception of God in relation to man at the level of high theology and dangerous reasoning. The same movement can be traced, at another level, in the mute, green environment of the action. We can find it in the very plants, in the unstable nature of the garden itself.

Famously, the nature of the garden seems to shift, in Milton's description of it, from a *hortus conclusus* or walled garden, such as was usual in the Middles Ages, to a Baroque or even proto-Romantic landscape of massed shadows and meandering streams.[128] In Latin—especially in Christian Latin—the word *error* means both 'wandering' and 'sin'. At ix. 161 Satan speaks of hiding in 'the mazy folds' of the serpent's body. One senses that if Milton were to put this line into Latin the word *error* might be used. At iv. 239 we are told how the streams in

[127] See above, p. 43.

[128] See G. Stanley Koehler, 'Milton and the Art of Landscape', in James D. Simmonds (ed.), *Milton Studies*, viii (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), pp. 3–40. See also Arnold Stein, *Answerable Style: Essays on Paradise Lost* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1953), pp. 66–7.

Paradise rolled 'with mazy error under pendant shades'. The passages are linked by the rare word, 'mazy', but the word 'error', for all its close links with sin, actually appears not in the description of Satan entering the snake but in the description of the garden. We are expected to believe that the serpent is wicked but the serpentine garden, as it fills the poet's imagination, catches him off-guard, so that he reveals his delight in vital error. The *culpa* of the errant streams seems unproblematically *felix*. We may sense a similar, potentially subversive, warming of the imagination when Milton tells us how Eve's hair 'in wanton ringlets waved' (iv. 306) where 'wanton' is suspended between moral dubiety and vital delight.

Meanwhile a subliminal excitement is planted in the poem by the mere fact that this *hortus conclusus* is actually on the top of a hill:

> Yet higher than their tops
> The verdurous wall of Paradise up sprung;
> Which to our general sire gave prospect large
> Into his nether empire neighbouring round.
>
> (iv. 142–5)

There is something strange about this passage. It tell us that Adam enjoyed an extensive prospect but at the same time it tells us how high the encircling walls are—higher than the treetops. The reader wonders wildly for a moment whether Adam had some way of scaling the vegetable wall in order to enjoy the view. The idea is not encouraged, somehow, by the poem. Satan is not sighted coming from afar by Adam. Before the Fall the 'nature poetry' given to Adam and Eve is near-sighted: Renaissance flowers not Romantic vistas. In all that follows the sense is strong that Adam and Eve are actually ignorant of distance until they fall: they then go out into the amazing world of space and misty luminescence at the end of the poem (xii. 628–49). It may be said that Milton tells us, before the poem is over, about two hills in Paradise. Both, notice, come after the Fall. In Book XI the angel Michael takes Adam to the top of the highest hill in Eden. The hill is good ('both ascend | In the visions of God', xi. 376–7) but the glorious prospect unfolded by the angel from the top of the hill ('now ope thine eyes', xi. 423) is, precisely, the prospect of a fallen futurity. It is

here that, by the 'narrative hiccough' we described earlier,[129] Michael removes the film which had formed on Adam's eyes as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge. The whole episode seems contrived to assert an orthodox difference (between bad knowledge of good with evil and good knowledge of good with evil, ultimately attained) which otherwise might escape us! Fascinatingly, as Milton imagines the angel disclosing to Adam the vast temporal prospect—a dynamic future history stemming from the Fall—the poet's mind fastens on Christ tempted by Satan in the wilderness:

> the tempter set
> Our second Adam in the wilderness,
> To show him all earth's kingdom and their glory . . .
>
> (xi. 382–4)

The Miltonic tic of correction operates here as elsewhere to repress heretical thoughts: 'for different cause' (xi. 382). But the analogy is stronger than the difference. Milton thinks of Satan because he knows that no film formed on Adam's eyes in Genesis; the serpent and no other leads mankind from the even tenor of Paradise into the testing turbulence of history. The other hill in Paradise appears at xii. 626. This is thronged with angels and merges, with symphonic power, with the extra-paradisal landscape into which Adam and Eve set out. The aesthetic logic holds: proto-Romantic space is gained only by falling.

'Transgressive', which etymologically signifies 'crossing a boundary' has become a catch-word of literary criticism in the late twentieth century. In the 'high-theological' narrative of *Paradise Lost* Satan crosses the boundary of Paradise, corrupts and elevates Adam and Eve with quickening knowledge, and then they in their turn pass through the wall and out: 'The world was all before them, where to choose' (xii. 646). In the lower, seemingly trivial, world of garden-planning in England after Milton there was a shift in taste: walls and fences were 'out' and gardens which appeared to merge with the surrounding landscape were 'in'. The story is told by Horace Walpole in his *History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, written in the

[129] See above, p. 135.

late 1760s but not published till 1780. First he describes the kind of garden he dislikes:

> When the custom of making square gardens enclosed with walls was thus established, to the exclusion of nature and prospect, pomp and solitude combined to call for something that might enrich and enliven the insipid and unanimated partition . . . Vases and sculpture were added to these unnecessary balconies, and statues furnished the lifeless spot with mimic representations of the excluded sons of men.[130]

There is a whiff of Whiggish politics in the concluding hit at aristocrats who prefer statuary to villagers, but the two watchwords of value are 'nature' and 'prospect'. At the same time the futile enterprise of attempting to 'enliven' the 'unanimated' suggests that life lies elsewhere, perhaps outside the wall. Beneath these twin flags of 'nature' and 'prospect' war is declared on the *hortus conclusus*, on the walling-in of gardens.

Walpole is writing after what he conceives to have been a successful revolution:

> . . . the capital stroke, the leading step to all that has followed, was (I believe the first thought was Bridgman's) the destruction of walls for boundaries, and the invention of fosses—an attempt then deemed so astonishing that the common people called them Ha!Ha!s to express their surprise at finding a sudden and unperceived check to their walk.[131]

The revolution, note, is a polite and partial affair. Just as the great landscape gardeners of the eighteenth century were not in fact content to let nature run wild but actually shaped hills, woods, and lakes to conform with prior aesthetic demands, so Walpole does not really abolish boundaries; he merely finds a way of making them unobtrusive: instead of being proudly raised they are modestly sunk, in the form of ditches, walled on the side invisible from the house. Cows, sheep, and 'the sons of men' are excluded still. But then he grows excited: 'At that moment appeared Kent, painter enough to taste the charms of landscape, bold and opinionative enough to dare and to dictate, and born with a genius to strike out a great system from the twilight of imperfect essays. He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden.'[132]

[130] In his *Anecdotes of Painting in England, with Additions*, ed. Ralph W. Wornum, 3 vols. (London: Swan Sonnenschein Lowry, 1888), vol. iii, p. 69.

[131] Ibid., p. 80.

[132] Ibid., p. 81.

What can a mere shift in gentlemanly taste have to do with Gnostic heresy, with God and Satan? Can we really think of William Kent leaping the fence to show the landowners of England how to arrange their parks as in any way analogous to Satan, who 'At one slight bound high over leaped all bound' (iv. 181)? To put the matter at its lowest, Kent was jumping out and Satan was jumping in. But Satan's entry, as we have seen, appears to liberate—to let out—a new aesthetic within the poetry, Eve's hair and streams as 'mazy' as a serpent's folds. Walpole himself has no doubt that he owes it all to Milton. He invokes the English poet with the sonorous phrase Lucretius used to call upon the spirit of his master Epicurus, *primum Graius homo . . .* (*De Rerum Natura*, i. 66):

> One man, one great man we had, on whom no education or custom could impose their prejudices; who, *on evil days though fallen and with darkness and solitude compassed around*, judged that the mistaken and fantastic ornaments he had seen in gardens, were unworthy of the Almighty hand that had planted the delights of paradise. He seems with the prophetic eye of taste . . . to have conceived, to have foreseen modern gardening; as Lord Bacon announced the discoveries since made by experimental philosophy. The description of Eden is a warmer and more just picture of the present style than Claud Lorrain could have painted from Hagley or Stourhead.[133]

Milton in the night of his blindness and political ruin, the broken Samson of the Republican cause, discards the rubble of the mere memory of existing gardens and, in *imagining* Paradise, makes the Galilean breakthrough (notice the reference to experimental science) to the new taste. Walpole goes on to quote extensively from *Paradise Lost*, including the passage about streams rolling 'with mazy error under pendant shades' (iv. 239).

John Dixon Hunt has argued persuasively that Walpole exaggerated the novelty and the prophetic character of Milton's imagination, that the lines quoted are entirely applicable to real existing gardens Milton could have seen on his Italian journey.[134]

[133] Ibid., pp. 72–3.

[134] *Garden and Grove: The Italian Landscape Garden and the English Imagination* (London: J. M. Dent, 1986), p. 174. See also the same author's 'Milton and the English Landscape Garden', *Milton Studies*, 11 (1981), pp. 81–105.

Certainly Kent did not invent the idea of natural landscape gardening. The Emperor Nero (as Walpole knew) was served by two garden-designers, Severus and Celer by name, who instead of impressing the eye with gold and jewels 'disposed open spaces, woods, lakes and prospects, as of desert places'.[135] But I cannot think Walpole's instinct was entirely wrong. Hunt points out that Kent, admired by Walpole, actually built flights of steps (condemned by Walpole) in his garden at Rousham. It might be more to the point to notice the utter absence of steps and statues in Milton's Paradise, with its 'hairy' walls (iv. 135). It seems clear that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Milton's imagined artless garden broke on the mind with an effect of revelation. Many contemporaries of Milton would have read Vida's *Christiad*, a work in which everything, so to speak, is turned to marble and gold. Even the humble upper room in which the Last Supper took place is described as *tectum auratum, ingens, pictisque insigne tapetis*, 'a gilded chamber, vast, splendid with coloured tapestries'.[136] Vida has made the upper room into something resembling the palace of Latinus in the seventh book of Virgil's *Aeneid*: *tectum augustum, ingens, centum sublime columnis* (170), 'an august chamber, vast, raised high with a hundred columns'. Something of this manner gets into Milton's description of the golden staircase to the Heavenly City at iii. 540–51, though with its spires and pinnacles the City itself is interestingly more Gothic than classical. Elsewhere the hard 'gold-and-marble' style is reserved for Pandemonium, the architecture of devils, here unequivocally bad. The garden of Milton's poem is a garden without benefit of marble additions. It is true that when Milton says that the brooks of Paradise rolled over 'sands of gold' (iv. 238) he may well have meant that the sand consisted of grains of real gold; after all, he refers, in the same line, to 'orient pearl'. But the glancing movement of the stream

[135] Tacitus, *Annals*, XV. xlii, in *Tacitus: The Histories*, with an English translation by Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library, 5 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1962–86), vol. iv, p. 278.

[136] *Christiad*, ii. 546, in *Marci Hieronymi Vidae Albae Episcopi Christiados Libri Sex* (Cremona: Ludovic Britan., 1535), no page numbers; in *Marco Girolamo Vida's The Christiad*, ed. with an English translation by Gertrude C. Drake and Clarence A. Forbes (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 72.

above the gold softens the metallic effect. Similarly we are told that the fruit on the tree of life was gold, not ordinary gold, but 'vegetable gold' (iv. 220), that is, 'living gold'. The 'gold' of Eve's hair at iv. 305 is obviously a colour, not a mineral. What makes all this especially absorbing is the fact that what we are watching is not an unproblematic pastoral triumph of innocence but, as I have tried to explain, the triumph of an aesthetic of errancy, the straight line for ever gloriously lost.

As at the theological level so at the aesthetic, bad has become good. The word 'beautiful' used to denote things which were apprehensible, patterned, and gaily coloured. It was axiomatically obvious to Aristotle that a beautiful object must be *eusunoptos*, that is, easily comprehended by the eye (*Poetics*, 1451 a 4, 1459 a 33). Milton's imagination is propulsive as his theology is propulsive. Modestly in his description of the garden, more boldly in his description of Satan's flight across Chaos, he is inventing the category of the sublime for England: that which is uncertain in outline, imperfectly apprehensible, too big or too shadowed to be taken in. This may sound unremarkable, but that is because we are late-born inheritors of the once-new aesthetic. Read about the sublime in the pages of Burke and you will find that it is by no means unequivocally good; it is huge, associated with pain and terror—almost identifiable with the ugly.[137] David Morse has observed of the eighteenth-century critic John Dennis that in his hands, 'the sublime becomes a theoretic device for the enthronement of Milton'.[138]

If we allow ourselves to listen to this less clamorous poetry of gardening, we shall find that the space between Milton and Blake—a space C. S. Lewis conceived to be both great and empty—begins to fill with intermediate shapes. John Dennis's 'enthronement' of Milton was eagerly received and acted upon by William Blake. We may suppose that Blake despised the aesthetic theorists of the earlier eighteenth century, but in the case of Dennis that cannot be true. In his *Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) Dennis wrote, 'the Sun mentioned in ordinary

[137] *Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, I. vii; II. vii (London: J. Dodsley, 1787), pp. 58–9, 127.

[138] *Perspectives on Romanticism: A Transformational Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 118.

Conversation, gives the Idea of a round flat shining Body, of about two foot diameter. But the Sun occurring to us in Meditation, gives the idea of a vast and glorious Body, and the top of all the visible Creation, and the brightest material Image of the Divinity'.[139] At the end of *A Vision of the Last Judgement* Blake wrote, 'When the Sun rises, do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea? O no, no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty' (E, p. 566). Dennis opposes what is for him a reductively factual account of the sun's appearance to the sun as it appears when we allow our perception to be irradiated by religious awe. In Blake the point is basically the same; the two passages are so similar that it is reasonable to suppose that Dennis was in Blake's mind when he wrote, that Dennis is his source. Both passages fail to 'home in' on the *pseudo*-objective character of 'two foot diameter' and 'somewhat like a Guinea'. I remember being infuriated when a child by adults who said that the weather would be good if you could see enough blue sky to make a sailor a pair of trousers. 'How far away is the sailor?' I asked, and they would never answer. If the sun is deemed to be a certain distance away, it will indeed be two feet across; if a little further it will be the size of a guinea. At the same time the actual two-foot rule and the guinea being used as measures of the breadth of the sun's disc can themselves be placed at variable distances from the eye. 'Brute empiricism' alone, in this situation, cannot give us a lateral measurement; we need a theory of distance. Nevertheless, if there is a difference between Dennis and Blake it lies in the note of faint shrillness imported by Blake. 'O no, no' is consciously petulant, ostentatiously wilful. We never feel that Dennis could giggle but Blake could.

Moreover Blake writes 'I' where Dennis wrote 'we'. The extra vertigo of a radical subjectivism somehow yoked to eternal vision enters the scheme. Simon Magus flew over Rome; Faustus flew with Mephistophilis so high that the earth appeared 'no bigger than my hand in quantity' (1616 text, III. i. 70); Satan flew up from hell to Paradise. Blake in his flight

[139] *The Critical Works of John Dennis,* ed. E. N. Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939–43), vol. i, p. 339.

breaks through the very categories 'true' and 'false'. It is not surprising that the writing seems to border on hysteria. The first men who really landed on the moon reported afterwards that they had felt a little drunk.

I have no doubt that the effect of Milton on subsequent Romanticism was more profound than that of Shakespeare. But it is also part of my argument that subversion is perennial, appearing in different modes in different times and places. Even the seemingly perverse theology of the naturalist *felix culpa* is not confined to the Judaeo-Christian tradition; it is pre-echoed in the strange theodicy of Virgil's first *Georgic*. Similarly, while I have seized on the element of Blakean effrontery in Milton's Satan, arguing that the Romantic poet did not simply invent this great fiery rebel but received material assistance from Milton himself, I must at the same time acknowledge that a sense that heroism attaches to the person who fights against enormous odds (and not to an unendangered omnipotence) is ancient—doubtless far older than *Jack the Giant-Killer*. The idea that this feeling of heroism is immediately erased, for a pre-Romantic, if the overwhelming opponent is divine, becomes obvious nonsense if we imagine a pre-Romantic who has read classical authors. Milton had. We know that he first projected *Paradise Lost* as a tragedy. If this tentative project belongs to the year 1640 we may be sure that Milton never supposed that it would be appropriate for performance in those immoral London theatres which the Long Parliament would soon close. Nor, manifestly, would it have suited the modishly apolaustic Restoration stage (Dryden's *The Age of Innocence* is a pretty poem but it is not Milton). What Milton had in mind was a biblical Greek tragedy, like *Samson Agonistes*. But Greek tragedy is full of great figures who heroically contend with the divine order: Ajax, Hercules, Eteocles, and Polynices; *authades ho theos, pros de tous theous ego*, 'The god is a thing of arrogance, and I against the gods', says Hercules in Euripides (*Hercules Furens*, 1243). Indeed it may be that Greek tragedy owes much of its power to the simultaneous existence, in the response of the audience, of an ancient admiration for braggart, larger-than-life warriors and a more recently developed sense that the gods are jealous, out to crush arrogance, so that in this world the prudent man lies low, keeps

his head down. This means that the hero can be impious yet still great, still admirable. The crisis is not yet acute because Greek gods did not have to be good (though one can watch the drift towards 'moralized' gods in Euripides). At the end of the *Trachiniae* of Sophocles, after the most protracted and dreadful scene of bodily agony in the whole of Greek drama, the chorus says, 'Nothing here but was the work of Zeus'. Yet in antiquity Sophocles was considered the most pious of the tragedians.

At the end of *Paradise Lost* we may feel, again, 'Nothing here but was the work of God', but, with the English poem, in so far as such pantheistic thoughts are allowed any play, they immediately entail a moral revision of the action itself; if God did it then for Milton it must have been good. It is not foolish to suppose that Milton shrank from the dramatic form because the analogy with Greek tragedy would have rendered Satan—immediately—Herculean, heroic. *Paradise Lost* teems with echoic pagan mythology. Notoriously, 'exclusionist' Protestant Milton intervenes everywhere in his own text to warn the reader, as it might be, that the story of Mulciber was a fable, that Proserpine was not Eve (i. 741, iv. 268). His extended classical similes, David Morse observes, again and again 'hinge on the introductory negative'.[140] Instead of opening with the word 'as' we have 'not' or 'nor': 'Not that fair field | Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers' (iv. 268–9). But Milton the Renaissance syncretist, by a unique poetic *occupatio*, has contrived to admit and then revel in the condemned matter of ancient legend. In this almost Ovidian field of ramifying deities and heroes there is, however, one notable absence. Earlier in this book we entered the world of *Paradise Lost* by way of the simile comparing Satan's shield with the moon—that moon who filches her 'pale fire' from the sun. We paused on the thought of Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven and was nailed to a rock by Zeus, and is never named in *Paradise Lost*. Could it be that Prometheus is left out not because he was irrelevant to the theme but because he was embarrassingly relevant? Could Milton have sensed that, if memories of Prometheus were released, an intuition of an analogous heroism in Satan would be unavoidable?

[140] *Perspectives on Romanticism*, p. 107.

It may be said that in fact the absence of Prometheus is unsurprising since, in the Renaissance, Prometheus was not viewed as a rebel against God. Francis Bacon in his *De Sapientia Veterum* allies Prometheus not with man but with God: 'Prometheus clearly and expressly signifies Providence'.[141] But a high-built humanist like Milton would not have gone to Bacon for his classical mythology (there is evidence that Milton read *The Advancement of Learning* but none, as far as I know, that he read the *De Sapientia Veterum*). He would have gone to the ancients themselves and the learned commentators. In the Greek version Prometheus is a Titan, a figure (like Christ in Arian theology) intermediate between divine and human. The *Etymologicum Magnum* is a Greek 'classical dictionary', of uncertain date, probably based on two earlier dictionaries compiled under the direction of the great Byzantine scholar Photius, who was Patriarch of Constantinople from 858 to 867 and from 878 to 886. Under 'Prometheus' the *Etymologicum* says, *kata metabolen, prometheus, ho prooron ta medea, ta bouleumata*,[142] 'By a change, forethinking, one seeing in advance counsels, plans' (*kata metabolen*, 'by a change', is probably a reference to the change of a single Greek letter in the transition from *prometheus* to *medea*, 'counsels', theta to delta). This is like the phraseology of Bacon, but nothing in the Greek sentence directs us to the divine side of the equation as the word 'Providence' with its upper-case initial does in Bacon's English. The Greek could as easily be about a prescient man as a prescient god. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* (42–58) we are told how Zeus hid fire from human kind, how Prometheus stole the fire, and how Zeus threatened or warned that this theft would bring untold harm to Prometheus and all human generations thereafter. Hesiod tells the story of the tormenting of Prometheus in his *Theogony* (520 ff.). The analogy of fire with intelligence (remember here that 'Prometheus' means 'forethought') and the further analogy with the narrative of Genesis need no ingenious demonstration; they state themselves. The historical link between the two stories is less clear. Robin Lane

[141] p. xxvi, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. M. Robertson (London: Routledge, 1905), p. 849.

[142] Ed. Thomas Gaisford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1848), p. 689.

Fox has suggested that the narrative of Genesis and of Hesiod both derive from an eighth century BC myth which traces all evil to woman (Eve corresponds to Pandora, the first woman and, as we saw, sister-in-law to Prometheus).[143] The protagonist of the tragedy *Prometheus Vinctus*, which Milton would have believed to be the work of Aeschylus, lends himself far more readily to a subversive Gnostic reading than to a Baconian reading. We do not know for sure that Milton read the *Prometheus Vinctus*. But of all the plays attributed to Aeschylus it was the most read in the Renaissance and was available in various continental editions. We know that he read the *Supplices*. It would be strange indeed if he skipped the *Prometheus Vinctus*. The humanist Comes (Natale Conti) in his account of the myth says that by some accounts the Promethean theft of fire was honourable, enabling men to discover medicine, law, the meaning of dreams, observation of nature, and the use of metals. *Nihil enim facit magis ingeniosos*, he adds, *quam pericula et difficultates*, 'Nothing increases ingenuity more than dangers and difficulties'.[144] This is the world of the naturalist *felix culpa* and of Virgil's first *Georgic*. We find Milton's friend Carlo Dati writing to him in some detail about the mythology of Conti in 1647.[145]

Just as Satan was linked with poetry, so was Prometheus. George Chapman wrote in his 'The Shadow of Night' (1594):

> Therefore Promethean Poets with the coals
> Of their most genial, more than human souls,
> In living verse created men like these[146]

Vida wrote in *De Arte Poetica*:

> Dona deum Musae: vulgus procul este profanum!
> Has magni natas Iovis olim duxit ab astris
> Callidus in terras insigni fraude Prometheus,
> cum liquidos etiam mortalibus attulit ignes[147]

143 *The Unauthorized Version* (London: Viking, 1991), pp. 19–22.

144 *Mythologiae sive explicationum fabularum libri decem*, IV. vi (Venice, 1567), pp. 99–101.

145 See J. Milton French (ed.), *The Life Records of John Milton*, 5 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1949–58), vol. ii, p. 205.

146 'Hymnus in Noctem', 131–3, in *The Poems of George Chapman*, ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 22–3.

147 I. 515–18, in Marco Girolamo Vida, *L'Arte Poetica*, ed. Raffaele Girardi (Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1982), p. 108.

[The muses are gifts of the gods. Keep your distance, profane rabble! Long ago the clever Prometheus by a celebrated deception led these daughters of great Jove from stars to earth, when he carried inconstant fire to mortals.]

Earlier—probably about 1486—Politian had addressed the personified figure of poetry with these words: *tu . . . prima fovere | ausa Prometheae caelestia semina flammae*[148] ('Thou didst first dare to foster the celestial seeds of the Promethean fire').

Similar language can be found in Milton's 'Ad Patrem', the Latin poem he wrote to his father.

> Nec tu vatis opus divinum despice carmen,
> Quo nihil aethereos ortus, et semina caeli,
> Nil magis humanam commendat origine mentem,
> Sancta Prometheae retinens vestigia flammae.
>
> (17–20)

[Do not despise the poet's work, divine song. Nothing argues better for our heavenly beginnings, for our celestial seeds, for the human mind commended by its origin, than poetry, retaining as it does the traces of the Promethean fire.]

When Milton introduces the word *vestigia*, 'traces' or 'footprints', we are reminded of the same pairing of words in Virgil's *agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*, 'I recognize the traces of the ancient flame' (*Aeneid*, iv. 23), where Dido is speaking of the rebirth of love. The fugitive effect of the Virgilian echo is that the passage is touched with a sense of erotic tragedy. But the main reference is to poetry, and to the poetry of the as yet unwritten *Paradise Lost*, for Milton goes on to speak of the poetry entering hell, stirring up and binding the spirits of that dreadful place (21–3).

Long before *Paradise Lost* was thought of, we may presume, Milton saw Prometheus as the impious thief of heaven's fire. In his Latin epigram, 'In Inventorem Bombardae', 'On the Inventor of Gunpowder', he wrote, perhaps in 1626,

> Iapetionidem laudavit caeca vetustas
> Qui tulit aetheream solis ab axe facem;
> At mihi maior erit qui lurida creditur arma,
> Et trifidum fulmen surripuisse Iovi.

[148] *Silvae*, iv, *Nutricia* ('On Poetry and Poets'), 72–4, in *Angeli Politiani Opera . . . Omnia* (Basel: Nicolaus Episcopus, 1553), p. 532.

[Blind antiquity lauded the son of Iapetus (Prometheus) because he carried off the heavenly torch from the axle-tree of the sun. I reckon the greater man is he who is believed to have filched from Jove his pale weaponry, his thunderflash.]

Milton is writing with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in his mind—popery, Guy Fawkes, the threat to the Protestant king. The young Milton knows that Prometheus was a hero for stealing fire from heaven and that the inventor of gunpowder went one better, in the eyes of some, in turning the fire of knowledge into a destroying fire. But with all the heavy sarcasm of would-be knowing youth, he condemns both of these propositions. The ancients who admired Prometheus were, he tells us, blind. His own praise of the inventor is ironic. Yet this is the poet who will in due course endorse the killing of an equally Protestant king and will write an epic in which Adam and Eve will indeed acquire higher knowledge after eating from the tree in defiance of the will of God—an acquisition which is not theft only because God himself changed and implicitly approved the outcome. The suggestion, condemned in the Latin epigram, that Prometheus was a hero grew stronger than the condemnation, which had sought to crush it, so that when Milton came to write *Paradise Lost* it was not longer prudent even to mention Prometheus. It was left to an English Romantic poet finally to unbind Prometheus.

We have come far enough in this story to know that no allegiance can be trusted; that which is hated can become, suddenly, that which is loved. But the Gnostic belief in a wicked, tyrannical Demiurge does imply, with surprising constancy, a hostility to nature and therefore to pastoral. This diurnal round of rocks and stones and trees is, to the Gnostic, the wheel of the torturer on which we are all broken. 'Nature' is a hate-word, not a love-word. 'The Garden', by Milton's friend Andrew Marvell, is a brilliant, hostile, pastoral commentary on *Paradise Lost*, written before *Paradise Lost* existed. For example, as we shall see in the next chapter, where Milton strives valiantly to present, in the love-making of Adam and Eve, a wholly innocent sexuality, Marvell gives us an innocence which is *incongruously* sexual—in short, a joke, but the innocence remains real and strong. The poem is full of peculiar retroactive energy, cancelling its own feats of intelligence.

> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find,
> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far other worlds and other seas
>
> (43–6)[149]

This glittering, fecund mind is reduced to an ecstatic natural simplicity, 'a green thought in a green shade' (48). Those plants which have been appropriated by the civilized intelligence as metaphors of competitive success, 'the palm, the oak, or bays' (2) are gloriously displaced by the plants themselves (14). In Marvell the green world is unfallen; only man, ingenious man, the ruiner of all, is fallen.

There are of course exceptions to this rule—'Little T.C.', by a kind of philosophical hyperbole, is herself more virtuous than nature, more innocent than innocence, for she can 'reform the errors of the spring' ('The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers', 27). Moreover, most strangely and interestingly, she is given an Adamic power of natural language:

> there with her fair aspect tames
> The wilder flowers, and gives them names . . .
>
> (4–5)

Marvell's early 'Dialogue, between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure' is puritanical in the modern popular sense of the term; it is against physical beauty, against pleasure. But observe how this remarkably unambiguous poem ends:

> PLEASURE
> Thou shalt know each hidden cause;
> And see the future time:
> Try what depth the centre draws;
> And then to heaven climb
> SOUL
> None thither mounts by the degree
> Of knowledge, but humility.
>
> (69–74)

Knowledge, *gnosis*, is firmly associated not with the (good) soul but with the despised pleasure principle. Here we may see

[149] This and all other quotations from Marvell are from *The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

the seed of something which will grow into the other kind of Romanticism, the anti-Gnostic kind, which readily identifies knowledge and the analytic intelligence with evil.

One way to describe developed English Romanticism is as a dialectic, having a thesis, an antithesis, and then variable syntheses. The thesis exalts nature: the mind must die into the green world, we must cultivate 'a wise passiveness',[150] 'we murder to dissect',[151] and so on. The thesis, as will already have been suggested by the last two brief quotations, is roughly associated with the name of Wordsworth. The antithesis, on the other hand, exalts not nature but imagination: now, when the antithesis reaches its most intense form, the mind actually creates the world: a quasi-divine active idealism, roughly associated with the names of Coleridge and Blake. 'Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me' wrote Blake, with the great English 'nature-Romantic' in his sights (the sentence comes from Blake's annotations to Wordsworth's *Poems* of 1815, E, p. 655). No unified synthesis followed this great collision, but rather myriad negotiations and accommodations; for example, if we think of imagination as something which wells up, unbidden, like a river (as in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan') imagination itself now feels like a part of nature rather than a part of mind.

Marvell however, with all his glittering wit, suspended between ancient pastoral and later Romanticism, seems to me to belong quite clearly to the 'thetic' rather than to the antithetic party. In truth the very fact that his intelligence issues as wit rather than as serious, questioning, world-altering doctrine as in Milton supports the interpretation. If one holds this view there is no shock or awkwardness, as there was for the great Renaissance intellectuals, in the proposition, 'Adam and Eve fell because they tasted knowledge'. On the contrary, the story accords with one's deepest prejudice. If ceasing to be a human being and becoming a tree is some sort of promotion, as it is in Marvell, then obviously the acquisition of knowledge will be, conversely, a kind of trauma.

[150] Wordsworth, 'Expostulation and Reply', in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 130.

[151] Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned', 28, ibid., p. 131.

In the 'Dialogue, between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure' all this is muffled and indistinct. Marvell needs to realign the forces in a less 'puritanical', more pastoral manner to achieve a stronger and more evidently Marvellian effect. This is done explicitly in the tense, brilliant 'Dialogue between the Soul and Body'. In this poem intellection—knowledge, memory—is firmly associated with the soul and is seen a prime agent of sin, of the Fall:

> But physic yet could never reach
> The maladies thou me dost teach
> . . . . . .
> Which knowledge forces me to know,
> And memory will not forgo.
> What but a soul could have the wit
> To build me up for sin so fit?
> So architects do square and hew
> Green trees that in the forest grew.
>
> (31–2, 39–44)

The word 'forces' reminds us of the unnatural character of knowledge. We may think of 'The Mower against Gardens',

> 'Tis all enforced, the fountain and the grot,
> While the sweet fields do lie forgot.
>
> (31–2)

The reader may begin to feel that Marvell is merely contradicting himself, exalting the garden in the poem of that name only to attack it here. In fact the basic pastoral intuition that nature is good, art bad, operates in both poems. In the poem called 'The Garden', the garden is contrasted, as the green place, with desperate human cleverness and strife; it is considered simply as plant, flower, fruit, and leaf and not at all as a place of horticultural art. But in 'The Mower against Gardens' it has become just that, and can accordingly be contrasted with the fragrant, unregarded fields which lie outside the garden wall. It may be said that here nature has fallen since we are told at the beginning of the poem that the world has been perverted:

> Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use,
> Did after him the world seduce . . .
>
> (91–20)

But nature untouched by art is in fact still here, in 'the sweet fields' (32). Nature itself remains innocent in this poem. We recognize that the garden is corrupt precisely because it is unnatural.

The contrast between Milton and Marvell is partly a matter of the contrast between a mind which delights in forward-reference and a mind which conversely, delights in backward-reference. W. H. Auden thought the human race was naturally divided into those who instinctively locate happiness in the past (pastoral 'Arcadians') and those who locate it in the future ('Utopians').[152] For the first party the happy place is likely to be green, artless; for the second it is likely to be a city, not a recovered Eden but the New Jerusalem. Utopians are politically active, Arcadians politically passive. The place of Milton in this scheme seems obvious. He is the most politically active of all the English poets, propulsive in the interior theology of his epic despite the fact that the poem deals with the story of a lost garden, preferring the adventure of *gnosis*, at the last, to the uniform bliss of Eden.

This ought to mean that Milton will write in fetters when he describes Paradise and at liberty when he describes the world outside. Some such contrast can indeed be traced. Take first these lines describing Paradise:

> A happy rural seat of various view;
> Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm,
> Others whose fruit burnished with golden rind
> Hung amiable, Hesperian fables true,
> If true, here only, and of delicious taste:
> Betwixt them lawns, or level downs, and flocks
> Grazing the tender herb, were interposed,
> Or palmy hillock, or the flowery lap
> Of some irriguous valley spread her store
> Flowers of all hue, and without thorn the rose
>
> (iv. 247–56)

There is nothing here to surprise the reader's imagination. Milton seems to be on automatic pilot. His 'unpremeditated

[152] See his essay, 'Dingley Dell and the Fleet', in his *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), pp. 407–28, esp. pp. 410–11. Cf. *Horae Canonicae*, 5, 'Vespers', in *The Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–57* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), pp. 333–5.

verse' stumbles, with the hesitation of a bad lecturer, over the notion of Hesperian myth made real. But now take the description of Satan's flight:

> Satan stayed not to reply,
> But glad that now his sea should find a shore,
> With fresh alacrity and force renewed
> Springs upward like a pyramid of fire
> Into the wild expanse, and through the shock
> Of fighting elements, on all sides round
> Environed wins his way; harder beset
> And more endangered, than when Argo passed
> Through Bosporus, betwixt the jostling rocks:
> Or when Ulysses on the larboard shunned
> Charybdis, and by the other whirlpool steered.
> So he with difficulty and labour hard
> Moved on, with difficulty and labour he;
> . . . . . .
> But now at last the sacred influence
> Of light appears, and from the walls of heaven
> Shoots far into the bosom of dim Night
> A glimmering dawn; here nature first begins
> Her farthest verge, and Chaos to retire
> As from her outmost works a broken foe
> With tumult less and with less hostile din,
> That Satan with less toil, and now with ease
> Wafts on the calmer wave by dubious light . . .
>
> (ii. 1010–22, 1034–42)

Blake would say that there is one word for the difference: energy. The repetition within two lines of 'with difficulty and labour' might be thought bad writing, like the hesitations over 'fables true' in the first passage, but it is not so. The repetition is here made to work, bodying forth the travail of the flight. And the reader's imagination is most certainly surprised by an upward-rushing 'pyramid of fire'.

But Milton, as we saw, found a way to admit the propulsive excitement of error into the aesthetic of the garden itself, to mass the shadows and confuse the now curious eye. By doing so he immediately rendered his landscape less pastoral, less innocent, more visionary, as the formal regularity of the *hortus conclusus* gives way in our imagination to the 'mazy error' of the streams. Marvell, sounding oddly like Horace Walpole,

hated the architects who 'square and hew | Green trees that in the forest grew' ('Dialogue between the Soul and Body', 43–4), but Marvell is here resisting not just art but also movement and change; one senses that these trees, had they been left alone by the architect, might have continued for ever in changeless innocence. Milton, very differently, makes the garden move in—and into—time. At ix. 202–3 it overgrows itself, gets out of hand. The poetry comes to life as the plants overspill their ordained places, but this is not Arcadian innocence; rather, it is the strangest of all the many pre-echoes in Book IX of the Fall itself. Although Milton may seem for a moment to have joined hands with his friend and opposite, Andrew Marvell, in so far as both reject the *hortus conclusus*, both prefer a natural wildness. Milton has yoked dangerous *gnosis* to a now dynamic nature. This is not the base nature wrought by the tyrannical Creator but rather a nature quickened in sympathy with the movement to *gnosis* of the First Man.

The Miltonic transformation of nature is a great act of poetic assimilation. In Marvell nature is poignantly unfallen; in Milton when Adam fell 'Earth felt the wound' (ix. 782); God extended his mighty hand and tilted the axis of the earth, thus ending the perpetual spring of Eden and betraying the world to seasonal change (x. 669–70). Milton's nature, like Adam and Eve, falls, disastrously—fortunately—gloriously. This act of assimilation resembles in some ways the Romantic assimilation of imagination to nature, by recasting it as an up-rushing river, operating independently of the rational ego. We may think here of the mysterious underground rivers of Milton's Paradise:

> many a rill
> Watered the garden; thence united fell
> Down the steep glade, and met the nether flood,
> Which from his darksome passage now appears . . .
>
> (iv. 229–32)

This river will in time irrigate Coleridge's visionary poem, 'Kubla Khan'. This also begins with a *hortus conclusus*, ringed with walls, stoutly defended:

> twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girdled round
>
> (6–7)

Then we hear the voice of Milton:

> Down the green hill a thwart the cedarn cover
> . . . . . .
> It flung up momently the sacred river.
> Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
> Through wood and dale the river ran,
> Then reached the caverns measureless to man . . .
>
> (13, 24–7)[153]

The serpentine, Miltonic word 'mazy' is there. Even the common preposition 'down' is here as much a Miltonism as 'mazy' is ('down the steep glade', 'down the green hill').

'Kubla Khan' is a poem about poetry and it moves from the notion of poetry as control or construct to poetry as dynamic, quasi-natural force, in which process nature itself passes, as in *Paradise Lost*, from Arcadian timelessness to dangerous life. Must art always be a waller-in of gardens, a squarer of trees? It is so in Marvell:

> He first enclosed within the garden's square
> A dead and standing pool of air.
>
> ('The Mower against Gardens', 5–6)

But in Milton there are, as in 'Kubla Khan', two modes of art, an art of control and an art of liberation. The art which first walked in Paradise was the art of God the Father, in his first, despotic, phase. But then, as we watch, Satan, Adam, and Eve and, without doubt, Milton himself are drawn into a Promethean poetry of movement and 'difference'.

153 *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), vol. i, p. 112.

IV
Blake

(1) Godly Nudists

Alexander Gilchrist in his great Victorian biography of Blake tells how Mr Thomas Butts, Blake's friend and patron, 'calling one day, found Mr and Mrs Blake sitting in their summerhouse, freed from "those troublesome disguises" [*Paradise Lost*, iv. 740] which have prevailed since the fall. "Come in!'"cried Blake; "It's only Adam and Eve, you know!" Husband and wife had been reading passages from *Paradise Lost* in character, and the garden of Hercules Buildings had to represent the Garden of Eden.'[1]

As Gilchrist tells the story it is a humorous anecdote about a notable English eccentric. William and Catherine Blake seem for a moment merely an extreme version of the dotty intellectuals who are regularly snooped on or exploded by William and the Outlaws in Richmal Crompton's immortal works. If the report is accurate, however, it appears that Blake himself knew that it was funny. 'It's only Adam and Eve, you know' must have been said with a gleam in the eye, as a consciously preposterous reassurance. We think of the Romantic movement in general—and of Romantic poetry in particular—as crossing boundaries and abolishing restrictions, but it is the way of history covertly to move fresh barriers into position, even while the old ones are being ostentatiously destroyed. Seventeenth-century poetry naturally admitted and revelled in humour, easily entwining it with the highest lyricism, the most audacious speculation. Romanticism is much less tolerant of humour. Keats was a naturally humorous soul but it would be difficult to infer this from his greatest poetry. Notice that Milton, who if the argument of this book holds is in so many

[1] *The Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1880), vol. i, p. 112.

ways *the* proto-Romantic poet, cannot accommodate humour with anything like the easy mastery of Andrew Marvell. But Blake sees the fun of it.

There are other stories. Allan Cunningham said that a

> friend, on whose veracity I have the fullest dependence, called one evening on Blake, and found him sitting with a pencil and a panel, drawing a portrait with all the seeming anxiety of a man who is conscious that he has got a fastidious sitter; he looked and drew, and drew and looked, yet no living soul was visible. 'Disturb me not,' said he, in a whisper, 'I have one sitting to me.' 'Sitting to you!' exclaimed his astonished visitor, 'where is he, and what is he?—I see no one.' 'But I see him, Sir,' answered Blake haughtily, 'there he is, his name is Lot—you may read of him in the Scripture. *He* is sitting for his portrait'.[2]

One is tempted to say that this is either stark madness or a joke. It would be rash, however, to extend the inference and conclude that Blake's inversive theology, his vision, and his mythology are all an essentially frivolous charade. The pantomime performance, 'looked and drew, and drew and looked', may have been laid on not just for its effect on the visitor but also to gratify a private obsession with the supposed priority of imagination to perception. Certainly we cannot take it straight. To put the point with dogged simplicity: a real visionary would not have needed to place a (physical) chair, would not have needed to make repeated checks by moving his (physical) head and focusing his (physical) eyes. The humour of the episode arises from the incongruity of the material apparatus of empirical portraiture on the one hand and wild imagination on the other. Blake's friend Oliver Finch observed that Blake could 'throw aside his visionary mood and paradoxes when he liked'.[3] But Blake could still have been offering, with antic exaggeration, a demonstration of a serious proposition. After all, we are told that when Blake was a child he was beaten for saying that he had seen angels in a tree.[4] Somehow one does not quite trust the story. It is the kind of anecdote people tell about themselves when they want others to marvel

[2] Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake*, 3rd edn., ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 309.

[3] Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*, vol. i, p. 366.

[4] Ibid., p. 7.

at how imaginative they are. But, if it is true, one can see how Blake, as he grew older, would have mastered various self-protective stratagems and that humour would be one of them.

We shall never know whether Mr and Mrs Blake were laughing before Thomas Butts arrived. My guess is that there may have been some laughter when they began but that it would have ceased. Gilchrist himself discerns what he calls 'a philosophic core'. He associates the story with a passage in Jefferson Hogg's *Life of Shelley* about a charming upper-class family who, around 1813, embraced 'philosophical nakedness' in order to return to nature and innocence.[5] This may suggest some sort of modern enlightened Naturism, but Gilchrist, whose instincts are good, actually makes a connection with older Millenarianism.

Epiphanius, writing in the fourth century AD, tells us that the Adamites, who may have been connected with those Gnostic Carpocratians who so shocked Clement of Alexandria a couple of centuries before,[6] wore no clothes and, exactly like William Blake, said, 'We are Adam and Eve'.[7] John Lawrence Mosheim in his magnificent *Institutiones Historiae Ecclesiasticae* which appeared in 1726 (afterwards much extended and revised) gives an account of nudism among the Beghards in the fifteenth century.[8] Those curious in such matters may read in Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* of Turlupins and Adamites going naked in the fifteenth century.[9] Knox carried the story of religious nudism forward into the sixteenth century, explaining how it broke out among Anabaptists and early Quakers.[10] He writes of certain Anabaptists of Amsterdam (the 'Naaktlopers') who on a February day stripped off all their clothes and ran through the streets. When brought before a magistrate they said, 'We are the naked truth':[11] 'Going naked for a sign' went unreproved by

5 Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*, vol. i, p. 113.

6 *Stromateis*, iii. 2, in Migne, *Patrologia* (*Series Graeca*), vol. viii, pp. 1104–113.

7 *Adversus Haereses*, 52, in *Epiphanii Episcopi Constantiae Opera*, ed. G. Dindorf, 5 vols. (Leipzig: T. O. Weigel, 1859), vol. ii, p. 506.

8 In the English translation by Archibald Maclaine, *An Ecclesiastical History*, vol. iii, p. 273.

9 Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950, p. 88.

10 Ibid., p. 104.

11 Ibid., p. 136. See also I. B. Horst (ed.), *The Dutch Dissenters* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), p. 25.

the Quaker George Fox.[12] Norman Cohn has written of those Bohemian Adamites of the fifteenth century who liked to gather naked around fires to sing hymns.[13] It is all oddly reminiscent of the Boy Scout movement.

We are all fallen, so all these stories seize our mind as comedy before they are received as records of primal purity. Mosheim in his account of the Beghards becomes mildly facetious in his style; he observes that trousers were considered a mark of servitude; the truly free dispensed with them.[14] Gilchrist in his account of Mr and Mrs Blake in the summerhouse flinches from the word 'naked' and instead employs the elegant Miltonic periphrastic reference to 'troublesome disguises'. It is instructive that Milton supplies him with the humorous evasion he requires. Because seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry was naturally receptive to wit we shall not find in Marvell that distinctively modern facetiousness which is founded on embarrassment. But it is there in Milton. His very high-mindedness has made him vulnerable to this strange weakness.

Frank Kermode once observed[15] that, in the mind of the Renaissance, there are two gardens: a garden of innocence (Eden) and a garden for love-making. Spenser's Bower of Bliss is a clear example of the second kind. Indeed the word 'bower' is an erotic signal in the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The frontispiece of the anonymous *Holland's Leaguer* (1632) depicts a brothel on an island in the Thames; in the corner of its garden we see an arbour or bower, with a couple inside.[16] Marvell in his poem 'The Garden' bemused learned commentators born centuries later by presenting the two gardens simultaneously. He gives us indeed a place of solitary contemplation, without women, but his reason for preferring it to party-going is that

> No white nor red was ever seen
> So amorous as this lovely green
> (17–18)

[12] Ibid., p. 151.
[13] *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 220.
[14] *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. iii, pp. 273–4.
[15] *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 286 ff.
[16] Reproduced in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 1516.

White and red are the colours of ladies' complexions. Green is preferred, not as we might expect because of its innocence but because it is sexier—a delicious example of Marvellian 'criterion-borrowing', the bland appropriation, to support a case, of precisely the argument which the opposition suppose to belong peculiarly to them. Throughout, the wit of the poem depends on our maintaining a sharp awareness of the traditional distinction between the two gardens. If we lose this, no sparks are struck.

But Milton, with conscious elevation of mind, sought to merge the two, by arguing for a sexual paradise, complete with a 'blissful bower' for love-making (iv. 690) which is both fully sexual and wholly innocent. The great doctors of the Church were clearly troubled by the notion of sex in Eden. Thomas Aquinas almost succeeded in evading the problem by making the period of innocence extremely short, so that Adam and Eve simply never get round to making love. He allows, however, that if the time had been longer they would have made love and that, incidentally, penile erection would have been wholly voluntary, as is, say, the movement of one's arm.[17] Aquinas is here echoing the view of St Augustine who says in *The City of God* that, while erections were entirely voluntary before the Fall,[18] things changed dramatically at the moment of the Fall itself; the reason they made themselves aprons of fig-leaves is that they were *confusi inoboedientia carnis suae*, 'embarrassed by the disobedience of the flesh'.[19] One is a little puzzled as to why Eve had to make an apron. The seventeenth century French Protestant Pierre Bayle eagerly embraced the shortness of time theory.[20] Augustine plaintively wonders at one point why, if the task in hand was gardening, God did not supply Adam with a gardener's boy instead of this strange female person: *operaretur terram . . . melius adiutorium masculus fieret*; 'To work the soil . . . a male would have made a better

[17] *Summa Theologiae*, 1 a, Quaestio 98, 2, in the Blackfriars edn., Latin text and English translation, ed. Thomas Gilby, 61 vols. (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1964–80), vol. xiv, p. 156.

[18] *De Civitate Dei*, XIV. xxiv, trans. Green, vol. iv, pp. 386–93.

[19] Ibid., XIV. xvii, trans. Green, vol. iv, p. 359.

[20] *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2 vols. (Rotterdam: Rainier Leers, 1697). See vol. i, p. 20, sub ABEL, note A. On Aquinas and Bayle, see James Grantham Turner, *One Flesh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 55.

helper'.[21] The orthodox view was that Adam and Eve were virgins at the time of their expulsion.[22]

This Milton bravely opposed. But he allowed blushes to form part of the sexual picture he presented. For Augustine blushing is a mark of our fallen condition; in this world our sexuality *appetit sciri ut tamen erubescit videri*, 'desires to be known even as it blushes to be seen'.[23] But Milton's Eve blushes before the Fall and, worse still, Adam seems to be excited by her apparent reluctance (viii. 511, 503–5). This is not a recovery of conscious, Marvellian wit. Rather, it is as if the matter of innocence shifts under Milton's hand and modulates into live (energizing) embarrassment; both poet and reader seem to be taken unawares. C. S. Lewis, reasoning correctly from his orthodox stance, saw this moment as a failure in the poem. One can, however, imagine a variant of the naturalist *felix culpa* arising from the application of the idea to sexuality. Just as morality becomes real when it is exposed to evil, so sex becomes more fully itself when it attains impurity. The idea of an energizing chiaroscuro—light with darkness—holds in both cases. Innocence is without shame. Is it so good, really, to be shameless? That in the psychological genesis of the poem which caused the streams to wander and the shadows to mass in the garden, causes Eve to blush. Each is a kind of fall, a wantonness and, at the same time, a quickening. There is a character in a Woody Allen film who is asked whether he thinks that sex is dirty. His answer is that, yes, sex is dirty—if it is done right. Milton seeks to describe innocence innocently but ends by describing blushes half-blushingly. By Marvell's standards, it is pretty inept, but it is wonderfully human. When Protestant paradisal sex finally hardened into temporary orthodoxy or the worship of D. H. Lawrence, wit was once more excluded. Milton has travelled so far down that road of almost priestly seriousness that in his case too wit is almost expunged from the account of Edenic sex. But to attain this end is to attain a new stasis which will in turn require a dynamic subversion. In fact the blushing of Eve, with all its *gaucherie* and the apologetic periphrasis, 'troublesome disguises', are indices of life.

[21] *De Genesi ad litteram*, viiii (= ix), 5, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xxxiv, p. 396.
[22] Turner, *One Flesh*, p. 79.
[23] *De Civitate Dei*, XIV. viii, trans. Green, vol. iv, p. 362.

If it is strange that Eve should blush, it is presumably stranger still that an angel should blush. Yet this is exactly what happens at viii. 619. Here Adam tells Raphael that he feels abashed in the presence of Eve, finds it hard to remember that she is really his inferior. While he is clear that this is not merely an effect of Eve's external beauty (the angel, it appears, was actually wrong to suggest this!), Adam knows that sexual love is the root cause of his difficulty. This prompts him to ask about the loves of angels. The very deference with which the question is posed suggests the presence of an implicit criticism—'If you are sexless how can you understand this?' It is here that we meet the lines,

> To whom the angel with a smile that glowed
> Celestial rosy red, love's proper hue,
> Answered.
>
> (viii. 618–20)

Why does Raphael blush? Some think it is because he is thinking of the (to us unimaginable) love of angels and is simply suffused with joy. Others think that he is momentarily shamed—almost, *intellectually* shamed—by the implicit force of Adam's question.[24] I am not certain that these readings exhaust the possibilities. It may be that there is an element of maidenly confusion at the mere mention of human sexuality. If the primary motivation is simple angelic ardour it is a little odd that the poet should bring us back so firmly to familiar, human sexuality with the phrase, 'love's proper hue'. Meanwhile the 'intellectual shame' reading is also, in its own way, too confidently high-minded, though a momentary compunction may be present, together with other feelings (after all, the angel did not get everything right as Adam has had to explain at viii. 596–604). This passage is not of course a description of directly sexual behaviour such as we are given in the case of Adam and Eve. The exchange between Adam and the angel is a matter of high courtesy and careful intellection, but sexuality lies at the heart of it and produces a remarkable tremor in the text. It is hard to avoid the feeling that the angel comes momentarily to life, is humanized by his

[24] See William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 104–5.

blush. For an angel to be so humanized is to be subjected to a kind of inverse education.

We are dealing, I submit, with one of the last, faint echoes of the Gnostic paradox. Knowledge itself, as we saw, was at first a kind of fall from pleromatic perfection into the lower, differentiated world, yet this fall proved a source of dynamic intellectual value. When Adam and Eve fell, they 'knew that they were naked'. The implication of sexual sin is rooted in the mere consciousness of nakedness. The word 'consciousness', *con-scientia,* adds to *scientia*, 'knowledge', a prefix, *con-*, suggesting privacy, enclosedness, reflexiveness. It is as if knowing is already a lapse from primal unity but knowing-that-we-know is worse (and better!) still. We find an equivalent Greek prefix, *en-*, entering the vocabulary of early Gnosticism: not 'knowing' *noesis*, 'thought', but *en-noia*, 'in-thinking'. *Protennoia*, *prot-en-noia*, 'First-in-thinking' is conceived, within the Pleromatic triad, as a female principle, giving a voice to thought ('I am the voice . . . within the immeasurable silence').[25] In *Paradise Lost* the strenuously asserted sinless sexuality of Adam and Eve is betrayed, into blushing consciousness, by the poet as he imagines the scene, and into devious, live euphemism as he composes the lines. Those Adamites and Quakers who sought to reassert their sinlessness in nakedness similarly soon found themselves involved in sexuality and all the complex, potentially tragic, potentially humorous negotiations of a fallen world.

Those who favour theories of psychological projection may speculate whether these schemes of differentiation into knowledge and self-consciousness may not affect memories or assumptions which can arise when the individual attempts to understand his or her own development from pre-verbal infancy to complex, language-using maturity. The 'great story' of pastoral, the descent from the Golden Age, and the 'great story' of Gnosticism might stand as the two principal mythologizings of this sequence, ontogeny reconstrued as phylogeny

[25] The tractate *Trimorphic Protennoia*, Nag Hammadi Corpus, xiii, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. Robinson, p. 513. This work was translated by John D. Turner. See also Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 62, and B. J. Gibbons, *Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 60–1.

(cosmogony, theogony . . .). Pastoral persistently viewed lost innocence and unity with regret; Gnosticism contrariwise with a growing, unsubduable excitement at the accession of knowledge.

(II) The Matrix of Blake's Thought

How could Blake have known about Gnosticism? With Milton, there is no problem. The poet who read so much might have picked up his knowledge in a dozen places: Augustine, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius are merely the most prominent. This, however, may be seen as the dead letter of the tradition. Such elements of Gnosticism as appear in the *Hermetica* and in the great magicians of the Renaissance show the tradition in living form. Moreover, early heresy may be revived by later heresy. Those aberrant Calvinists who drew the obvious Antinomian conclusion from Calvin's doctrine evolved a kind of libertinism which is startlingly similar to the libertinism of some early Gnostics. My chapter on Milton closed, on a minor key, with a discussion of the aesthetics of Milton's garden. I suggested that a path to high English Romanticism could be traced by way of eighteenth-century garden designers and theorists of the sublime. In doctrine, similarly, we shall find that there are figures, some belonging to 'low culture', who can bridge the chasm which seems to separate Blake from Milton.

The old simple picture of Blake as a wholly solitary genius is no longer sustainable. It is true that, as his prophetic narratives began to ramify by some inner principle of fertility, he came very close to producing a private—almost solipsistic—mythology, something which might seem as inherently absurd to an anthropologist as a private language seemed to Wittgenstein. The similarities, sometimes intricate, between his thought and that of Gnostics whom (dare we say it?) he could not possibly have read is quite inescapable. Less surprising but still mildly puzzling are the connections between Blake's writings and recorded remarks and those of certain seventeenth-century Antinomians.

Milton had ventured to present unfallen sexuality in

Paradise Lost but it is in no sense a libertine poem. But when Blake tells us that the genitals are the site of beauty, that those who restrain desire do so only because their desire is weak enough to be restrained, that the lust of the goat is the bounty of God, that the nakedness of woman is the work of God (*MHH*, Plates 10, 5, 8, E, pp. 37, 34, 36), many will feel that such violent affirmation of sexuality is distinctively modern, inconceivable before the Romantic movement, having no warrant in Milton's century and certainly none in the early years of the Christian era.

Let us begin with the seventeenth century. The term 'Ranters', like 'Baroque' and 'Rococo', began as a term of abuse. As with the Gnostics we have to rely in part upon hostile reports. Richard Baxter, in his *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), says of the Ranters, 'withal they conjoined a cursed doctrine of libertinism which brought them to all abominable filthiness of life. They taught as the Familists that God regardeth not the actions of the outward man, but of the heart, and that to the pure all things are pure (even things forbidden)'.[26] John Holland suggests in his *The Smoke of the Bottomless Pit . . . or, the Mad Crew* (1651) that these doctrines were rooted in pantheism: 'They maintain that God is essentially in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature as in another: I saw this expression in a Book of theirs, that the essence of God was as much in the ivie leaf as in the most glorious angel'.[27] This takes us back to Milton's nervousness in the *De Doctrina Christiana* lest he should fall into a conception of God which is incompatible with reverence for God, through dwelling on his omnipresence (*DDC*, I. ii, pp. 144–5).[28] But it also reaches forward to Blake's 'God only acts & Is, in existing beings or Men' (*MHH*, Plate 16, E, p. 39). It may be said that Blake's 'lust of the goat' is a good deal more violent than Holland's ivy leaf and that to say that God is 'only' in existing beings or men is, again, much

[26] I. 76, in *Reliquiae Baxterianae . . . or, Mr Richard Baxter's Narrative of . . . his Life and Times* (London: Matthew Sylvester, printed for T. Parkhurst *et al.*, 1696); in *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, abridged by J. M. Lloyd Thomas, ed. N. H. Keble (London: J. M. Dent, 1974), p. 73.

[27] London: printed for John Wright, p. 2.

[28] See above, p. 159.

more radical, since it abolishes the transcendent God and leaves only the immanent God. But Holland also tells us that the Ranters held, 'concerning sinne, that there is no such thing as that which men call sin, that sin and holiness are all one to God, and that God delights as much in the one as in the other'.[29]

We may recall that Episcopius, the Dutch Arminian, warned against the inference, seemingly inescapable if God is everywhere, that he is no less present in devils than in angels, in hell than in heaven. Holland says of a certain Ranter that 'he hoped to see the poor Devil clear'd of a great many slanders that had been cast upon him'.[30] This last remark is laced with humour but one cannot be sure that there was no core of subversive doctrine. Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is full of wit, is a kind of squib against Swedenborgian solemnity, and it exalts the devil, but here too it would be foolish to take the promotion of the devil as entirely comic, wholly ironic. Thomas Edwards, another hostile witness of the excesses of the Ranters, wrote, 'An Antinomian preacher preaching in *London* on a Fast-day, said, it was better for Christians to be drinking in an Ale-house, or to be in a Whore-house than to be keeping fast legally'.[31] Blake wrote,

> Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
> But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm
>
> ('The Little Vagabond', E, p. 26)

The modern reader may easily miss the proper force of 'legally', as used by Thomas Edwards's antinomian. It is clear that in certain circles the words 'law', 'legally', and so on carried a charge of automatic condemnation.

The doctrine, which we have already glimpsed at various points in this book, is fundamentally Pauline:

> Knowing that a man is not justified by the work of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ . . . by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Galatians 2: 16)
>
> For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God (Galatians 2: 19)

[29] *The Smoke of the Bottomless Pit*, p. 4. [30] Ibid., p. 6.
[31] *The Second Part of Gangraena* (London: printed by T.R. and E.M. for Ralph Smith, 1646), p. 121.

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us . . . (Galatians 3: 13)

For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. (Romans 7: 5–6)

Paul is careful to add that the law is not sin (Romans 7: 7) and that meanwhile he delights in the law of God 'after the inward man' (Romans 7: 22). But the overwhelming impression is of release from a kind of tyranny. If we are saved, if we are freed from sin, if the Old Law of Moses no longer applies, we can do anything: 'but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful unto me . . . (1 Corinthians 6: 11–12)

It is interesting that the seventh of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, 'The Old Testament is not contrary to the New . . . ', actually forbids the inference that the Ten Commandments no longer apply to the moral life. The authorities, indeed, had cause for anxiety on this point. 'Antinomian' means, etymologically, 'against the law'. The law which is opposed is the Old Law of the Jews from which Christians are for ever freed. 'I declare', wrote the Muggletonian John Reeve, 'that the law of Moses, both moral and ceremonial . . . did belong to the Jews only'; the Gospel of Jesus, he tells us, made 'all Observations of the Law of Moses . . . of no Use for ever'.[32] The Antinomian preacher described by Thomas Edwards is likely to have uttered the word 'legally', in 'keeping fast legally' with triumphant scorn. Some Ranters liked to refer to the Bible as 'the Divine Legacy'. E. P. Thompson calls this 'ironic',[33] but what is going on is rather more complex than mere ironic reversal. We speak of the Old and New Testaments. A testament is a bequest and a bequest is a legacy. When we hit the word 'legacy', however, we are confronted with the root, *leg*-'law' and the rhetorical work of disparagement is done for us.

[32] *Sacred Remains* (n.d. [1706], p. 74, cited in E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 92.

[33] *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 55.

The recurrent watchwords of Antinomianism are thoroughly grounded in Scripture and orthodoxy: 'All things are lawful unto me' (Paul, 1 Corinthians 6: 12), Luther's *Pecca fortiter*, 'Sin boldly',[34] and Augustine's *Ama et fac quod vis*, 'Love and do what you want'. Augustine did not actually write *Ama et fac quod vis*, but the words he actually used, *Dilige, et quod vis fac*,[35] mean exactly the same thing. It might be thought that Augustine is far from any sort of immoralism, because the word 'love' already comprehends all morality. If that is in place the sternest moralist need have nothing to fear. Luther's *pecca fortiter*. 'Sin boldly', like the other famous passage in which he wishes his sins greater that redeeming Grace might have more to work on,[36] is much more disturbing. But that distinctive note of Protestantism whereby sin can become a matter not so much for grief as for mild self-congratulation can be found over and over again. For example Bunyan observes happily, 'Great Sins do draw out great Grace'.[37]

Calvin taught that no one is saved because he or she does virtuous things: salvation and damnation are settled, inscrutably, before we are born, by predestination. The old rules, 'Thou shalt not kill', 'Thou shalt not steal', 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', are superseded by the higher drama of inexplicable Grace. It follows, as the night the day, that, as regards salvation, it does not matter how well or how badly we behave. Calvinism directly implies Antinomianism. Everyone knows, however, that most Calvinists, most Protestants, did not draw this conclusion. Instead, irrationally(?) they considered virtuous behaviour 'a mark of election' and were strenuously virtuous in order *to have been* saved. Calvin and Luther repeatedly condemned the libertines and Antinomians among their followers. The shift from the neutral doctrine, 'Everything is permitted' to the positive celebration of sexual freedom and

34 Letter to Philip Melanchthon, 1 Aug. 1521, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Pelikan vol. xlviii (1963), trans. G. G. Krodel, p. 282.

35 *On the First Epistle of St John*, Homily vii. 8, in *A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, 48 vols. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1838–85), vol. xix, pp. 1185–6.

36 Commentary on Galatians, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Pelikan, vol. xii (1955), pp. 310–11.

37 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, section 253, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 78.

the like is perhaps more a matter of the psychology of competitive display than of rational inference.

One might compare the entire phenomenon with the Russian reaction in the nineteenth century to English Utilitarianism. Utilitarian morality when we meet it in Bentham or John Stuart Mill seems mere common sense. If one acts in such a way as to cause the greatest happiness, or the least misery, one is bound to be acting rightly. One of the first things the Russians noticed is that this formula abolishes the Ten Commandments ('the Law', in seventeenth-century terms). The Ten Commandments, set forth in sequence as they are, presuppose an atomistic ethic; certain actions, such as stealing or killing, are always wrong, *tout court*. Utilitarianism on the other hand, by referring all to consequence, presupposes a contextualist ethic; that is, if we are to decide whether a given action is good or bad, we need always to look at the context in which it is performed. For example, if a murder is done in the secure knowledge that, if it had not been done, two far more painful deaths would have occurred, this murder is not wrong but right. It becomes virtually impossible to think of any action which is not conceivably justifiable by this way of thinking. The torturing of a child will be justifiable if it is truly clear that it will prevent the torture of two other children. Even the extermination of the entire population of the world could be justified by showing that, if it had not been done, the entire population would have perished more painfully from another cause. Therefore certain Russians drew the conclusion which Ivan draws in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'Everything is permitted'.[38] Remember the words of St Paul, 'All things are lawful unto me'. To think contextually, to scorn the old automatic rules, became the mark of the modern intellectual. Socialistically minded people began to vie with one another in showing their readiness to conceive increasingly violent means to increasingly remote, greater ends. Liputin, introducing Kirilov in *The Possessed*, says, 'He rejects morality altogether and holds with the last new principle of general destruction for the sake of the ultimate good. He demands already more than

[38] V. v, in the translation by David Magarshak, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), vol. i, p. 309.

a hundred million heads for the establishment of common sense in Europe; many more than they demanded at the last Peace Congress.'[39] This is burlesque but it is not without a historical foundation. Dimitri Pisarev's articles in *The Russian Word* introduce into the grey Utilitarian calculus a peculiar note of excited heroics. The notion of the lonely, independent-minded, blood-letting benefactor begins, insensibly, to be accompanied by a corresponding contempt for the conventionally minded masses, who are seen, increasingly, as the *corpora vilia* of the great coming social experiment.[40] The notion of strength as self-authorizing begins to emerge: 'The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God' (*MHH*, Plate 8, E, p. 36). As we move into the meta-ethical cult of freedom, the original, wholly traditional element in Utilitarian morality, the notion that it is good to prevent suffering, simply fades, displaced by the heady rapture of pre-moral liberty. We saw in Milton how, in like manner, the great ultimate good of heaven faded and was intermittently displaced by the immediate meta-good of choice itself.

It looks very much as if extreme Protestants competed with one another in demonstrating the extent to which they were liberated from the bondage of the Law. In such an atmosphere one obviously 'scores' *morally* with each act of adultery, and, as one does so, the new inverse ethic in which adultery is actually commended is beginning to form.

Calvinist predestinarian theology, with its insistence that good works according to the Law had nothing to do with salvation since the matter was already settled, played an important part. 'Solifidianism', the Protestant doctrine that justification is by faith alone ('A man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the law', Romans 3: 28), which could be held without an accompanying commitment to full Calvinist theological determinism, was perhaps more important still. There is virtually no sign of any predestinarian element in Blake; he is too good a disciple of Milton for that. In a marginal note on

[39] I. iii. 4, in Constance Garnett's translation, *The Possessed* (London: Heinemann, 1914), p. 83.

[40] See Joseph Frank, 'The World of Raskolnikov', *Encounter* (June 1966), pp. 30–5, and A. D. Nuttall, *Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment: Murder as Philosophic Experiment* (Edinburgh: Sussex University Press, 1978), p. 42.

Swedenborg's *Divine Providence* Blake expresses his horror at the Swedish thinker's notion that evil in this world will necessarily be continued in the next, calls it 'Predestination after this life' and adds that it is 'more Abominable' than Calvin's predestination. It is evident that he means '*even* more abominable' (E, p. 610). But it was when the conception of man as liberated from the Law met the conception of God as immanent in all creation that full libertinism exploded.

Henry More, the English Platonist, thought that the 'perfectionist' movement, which comprehended Adamites, Jorists, Spanish Illuminati, Ranters, and Quakers, was sexually driven. He described Henry Niclaes, the founder of the Family of Love, as 'a Pimp or second *Sardanapalus*', who inveighed 'against Shamefacedness and Modesty in men and women'.[41] Jonathan Swift, writing after much of the action had died down, humorously observed that enthusiastic religion was really all sex:

> The seed or principle which has ever put men upon *visions* in things *invisible*, is of a corporeal nature; for the profounder chemists inform us that the strongest spirits may be extracted from human flesh. Besides, the spinal marrow being nothing else but a continuation of the brain, must needs create a very free communication between the superior faculties and those below: and thus the *thorn in the flesh* serves for a spur to the *spirit*.[42]

That Swift intends—humorously of course—a sexual implication by the phrase 'thorn in the flesh' is made clear by his reference a few lines earlier to the supposedly libertine practices of the Family of Love and by a further reference, shortly afterwards, to *furor uterinus* in female Quakers. *Furor uterinus* ('womb-rage') is glossed by the Oxford editors as 'nymphomania'.[43] Robert Burton in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* gave a similar account of the Anabaptists of Münster.[44] Once more the curious can find a pre-echo among the early Gnostics.

41 *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (London: printed by John Flesher for W. Morden, 1660), pp. xi, 158–9, 254, 365, 510.

42 *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, in *Jonathan Swift*, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 179.

43 Ibid., p. 638.

44 III. iii. 4, 2, ed. T. C. Faulkner *et al.*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989–94), vol. iii, p. 316.

Epiphanius in the fourth century AD said that the Adamites (actually noted for asceticism) were really driven by lust.[45] All these hostile accounts of heretical religion strangely anticipate Freud's view that all religion has a libidinal source. Note that Freud and Epiphanius agree that to reveal this source is to destroy the religious pretension of the *dévot*. But with certain of the Ranters it is hard to be sure that they would be in any way dismayed by such a demonstration.

Perhaps the most extreme of them all was Abiezer Coppe. Anthony à Wood tells how, in 1636, Coppe became a Postmaster, or Scholar, of Merton College, Oxford, 'and it was then notoriously known that he would several times entertain for one night, or more, a wanton housewife in his chamber . . . in the little or old quadrangle'; seemingly Coppe was seen taking food away at dinner-time to give to this lady; when challenged, he said, 'It was a bit for his cat'. The story sounds as if it might be true. It is less easy to believe Wood when he adds that ''twas usual with him to preach stark naked many blasphemies and unheard of villainies in the day-time, and in the night to be drunk and lye with a wench, that had also been his hearer, stark naked'[46] (more godly nudism). Coppe writes violent, demotic, exalted prose in which religion and sexuality are strangely mingled:

> Are you asleep? for shame rise, its break aday, the *day* breaks, the *Shaddows* flie away, the *dawning* of the *day* woes [woos] you to arise, and let *him* into your *hearts*.
>
> It is the voyce of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me my Sister, my *love*, my *dove*, for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of night. The *day spring* from on high would faine *visit* you, as well as old *Zachary* would faine visit you, who sit in *darkness*, and the *shadow* of *death*, as well as those who dwell in the *Hill countrey*
>
> The day *star* is up, rise up my *love*, my *dove*, my fair one, and *come away* . . .[47]

45 *Adversus Haereses*, 52, ed. Dindorf, vol. ii, pp. 504–7.

46 *Athenae Oxonienses* [1691–2], 4 vols. (London: F. and C. Rivington *et al.*, 1813–20), vol. iii, p. 959.

47 *Some Sweet Sips, of some Spirituall Wine* (1649), ch. i, in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Junction Books, 1983), pp. 51–2.

The language is the language of the Song of Songs:

> My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away . . . Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved . . . I sleep but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of the night. (2: 10, 17; 5: 2)

Biblical commentators have disputed for centuries about the Song of Songs: is it simply a love poem or should we read it allegorically—for example, as dealing with the love of Christ for his Church? Francis Rous, a strong Puritan who represented Devonshire in the Barebones Parliament of 1653, writes in his *Mysticall Marriage* (1635) of the 'chamber within us and [the] bed of love in that Chamber, wherein Christ meets . . . the soule'; he speaks of 'the eternall life of marriage consummate', urges the soul to 'cleave to him' and to 'suck him strongly with thy love, that more vertue may come out of him'. We may feel that the erotic imagination is beginning to escape control, but Rous is clear that, as regards human conduct, to be in Paradise is to be *without* lust.[48] The difference between divine and human love, between the allegorical interpretation and the literal, looks absolute, unbridgeable. But in Coppe the very distinction seems to have been abolished. It is as if religious experience is recognized as erotic, not in origin (as in Freudian theory) but directly and immediately.

I have said that there is a vein of humour in the inversive utterances and performances of Blake. Abiezer Coppe seems at times to be 'high' on the new sinlessness, close to a kind of hysteria. His use of dashes (if they are not editorial) is as extreme as Sterne's in *Tristram Shandy* and Sterne's humour, we know, bordered at times on hysteria; he told Garrick, 'I laugh till I cry, and in the same tender moments cry till I laugh';[49] Sometimes Coppe seems deliberately to play the fool

[48] *The Mysticall Marriage* (London: printed by W.I. and T.P. for I. Emery, 1635), pp. A3^{r} (Preface), 59, 113, 287, 38. Rous can, on occasion, use 'lust' as a term of approval: 'Looke on him so, that thou maist lust after him', but he always ends by making his condemnation of bodily lust clear; the passage continues, 'For the spirit hath his lust also . . . it lusteth against the flesh' (p. 13).

[49] In a letter, 19 April, 1762, *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. L. P. Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 163.

(if we ask, 'What fool is he playing?' the answer would be, 'The fool in *King Lear*', for that is the Shakespeare play in which we are given most memorably a world turned upside down, a vision of political inversion). Near the beginning of his *Some Sweet Sips, of some Spirituall Wine* he writes,

> Arise, but rise not till the Lord awakens thee. I could wish he would doe it by himselfe, immediately. His will be done. His is the Kingdome, the power and the glory; for ever and ever, Amen.
>
> I would (by no means, neither indeed can I) pull you out of Bed by head and shoulders
>
> —May the cords of *Love* draw you out.
>
> If through the heat of love, mixt with zeale, and weakness (in these) thou shouldst start out of thy bed naked, into the notion of these—I should be very sorry for thee, fearing thou mightst be starved these cold winter nights.[50]

Eldritch laughter is heard amid the apolcalyptic thunder. The accent is indeed that of Lear's fool confronted with the Bedlamite naked wretch Edgar, 'Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed' (III. iv. 65).

In chapter V of *A Second Fiery Flying Roule* Coppe writes, once more with a mixture of facetiousness, self-abasement, and prophetic vehemence about his sexual adventures, 'that notorious business with the Gypseys'.[51] Pretty clearly, pride predominates over shame: 'I sate down, and eat and drank around on the ground with Gypseys, and clip't, hug'd and kiss'd them, putting my hand in their bosomes, loving the she-Gipsies dearly.'[52] A page later Coppe seems to allude to the practice of godly nudism: 'To such a little child, undressing is as good as dressing, foul cloaths, as good as fair cloaths—he knows no evill, & c.—And shall see evill no more,—but he must first lose all his righteousness, every bit of his holinesse, and every crum of his Religion . . .'.[53] The confusion—or conscious paradox—of innocence involved with sin becomes more pressing:

> Beauty is the father of lust or love. Well! I have gone along the streets impregnant with that child (lust) which a particular beauty had begot: but coming to the place, where I expected to have been delivered, I have providentially met there a company of devills in

[50] In *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 48.
[51] Ibid., p. 105. [52] Ibid., p. 106. [53] Ibid., p. 107.

appearance, though Angells with golden vialls in reality, pouring out full vialls, of such odious abominable words, that are not lawful to be uttered.[54]

Nigel Smith observes that Laurence Clarkson sought to justify his sexual licence by referring to Ecclesiastes 3: 11: 'He hath made everything beautiful in his time'.[55] It is interesting that Coppe likes to identify himself with David and his imagined critic with Michal, who was offended by David's dancing (2 Samuel 6: 16–20). Charles Williams a notable godly woman-izer—or woman-attractor—of the twentieth century, similarly, nicknamed his wife Michal. She may indeed have looked upon his pirouetting with a lack-lustre eye.

The affinity of style between Coppe and Blake is unmistakable. Here is Coppe: 'Shall I hear poor rogues in Newgate, Ludgate, cry *bread, bread, bread, for the Lord's sake*; and shall I not pity them . . ?' The use of London place-names, the elementary monosyllables, the use of direct speech are all Blake-before-Blake. Take for example this line from *Jerusalem*,

> Hampstead, Highgate, Finchley, Hendon, Muswell Hill rage loud.
>
> (Plate 16, E, p. 159)

or this, from 'The Chimney Sweeper',

> A little black thing among the snow:
> Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!
>
> (Songs of Experience, E, p. 22)

Jacob Bauthumley in *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (1650) writes, 'How flesh should defile a spirit I cannot imagine'.[56] Blake's famous words about 'the roaring of lions' and 'the tigers of wrath' (E, pp. 36, 37) are pre-echoed when Bauthumley writes, 'The wrath of man praises God as well as his love and meekness, and God glorified in the one as well as the other'.[57] In Bauthumley such moments of Antinomianism are clearly grounded in a pantheist theology: 'Nay, I see that God is in all Creatures'.[58] What we take to be evil must be, in so far as it

54 Ibid., p. 108.

55 *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 256.

56 In *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 249.

57 Ibid., p. 244.

58 Ibid., p. 232.

exists, the dark side of God himself. When Blake early in 1788(?) inscribed his marginalia on Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, he affirmed, in response to Swedenborg's 'There are also Hells under Hells', 'Under every *Good* is a hell; i.e. hell is the outward or extreme of heaven of the body of the lord'.[59] Bauthumley writes: 'For Sin, I cannot tell how to call it anything, because it is nothing'.[60] Afterwards he adds, more conventionally, 'It is a living out of the will of God',[61] but one senses nevertheless that the old scholastic doctrine of evil as negation or privation is on the point of resolving itself into a simple erasure of the category, 'sin'. The libertine message is strong and clear, 'Men may drink, swear, and be profane and live as they list'.[62]

Laurence Clarkson's *The Lost Sheep Found* (1660) records amorous adventures as part of his spiritual journey: 'so coming to *Canterbury* there was some six of this way, amongst whom was a maid of pretty knowledge, who with my Doctrine was affected, and I affected to lye with her, so that night pervailed [*sic*], and satisfied my lust, afterwards the mayd was highly in love with me . . .'.[63] Clarkson then describes, with no hint of shame although he is writing from a general position of later repentance, how, with some difficulty, he disengaged himself from the young woman. In another place he writes,

> I came for *London* again, to visit my old society; which then *Mary Midleton* of *Chelmsford*, and Mrs *Star* was deeply in love with me, so having parted with Mrs *Midleton*, Mrs *Star* and I went up and down the countries as man and wife, spending our time in feasting and drinking so that Tavernes I called the house of God; and the Drawers Messengers; and Sack Divinity . . . Doctor *Pagets* maid stripped her self naked, and skipped among them . . .[64]

Where Don Quixote, maddened by reading too much chivalric romance, saw the inn-keeper as the governor of a castle and the prostitutes as high-born damsels, Bible-struck Clarkson

[59] See *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley Jr., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), vol. ii, p. 1349.
[60] In *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 242.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., p. 244.
[63] Ibid., p. 178.
[64] Ibid., pp. 182–3.

sees tapsters as angels. There is also a resemblance to the revolutionaries in Dostoevsky who competitively demonstrate their independence from traditional morality; Clarkson felt the need to prove himself:

> Now observe at this time that my judgement was this, that there was no man could be free'd from sin, till he had acted that so called sin as no sin . . . I judged that pure to me, which to a dark understanding was impure, for to the pure all things, yea all acts were pure . . . you can lie with all women as one woman, and not judge it sin.[65]

Pantheism can easily 'flip over' from glorification to reduction. Instead of 'All things are really divine' we have, suddenly, 'The divine is really just "All things".' If nature is divine, perhaps God is only nature. Clarkson seems to have reached this point (unless, like other repentant sinners, he is exaggerating his own errors) when he confesses that he judged that there was 'no God but only nature'.[66]

Andrew Welburn has written that the Ranters were fairly consistent Gnostics. They regarded the Old Testament God as a Demiurge—'a God-Devil'.[67] Certainly some of them thought the God worshipped by most Christians was wicked. William Erbery wrote, to the so-called Christians of his time, 'Oh! God is a stranger to you, and you are strange from his bosom; you have another beloved now, besides himself, some corruption or creature you cleave to, the Lord knows'.[68] In another place he wrote, 'We have looked upon Anti-Christ once at Rome, but have often seen him in Reformed Churches'.[69] Meanwhile the merging of Christ with Adam (that is with innocent humanity) proceeds apace in the writings of the Ranters. There are obvious similarities to the Gnostic doctrine of Adamas, the first man who was also the divine word.[70] 'The Son and the Saints make one perfect man', says Erbery, and adds that 'the fullness

65 Ibid., pp. 180–1.

66 Ibid., p. 185.

67 *The Truth of Imagination: An Introduction to Visionary Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 218.

68 *The Wretched People; Or, the People of God, in The Testimony of William Erbery left upon Record for the Saints of Succeeding Ages* (London: printed for Giles Calvert, 1658), p. 172.

69 *A Scourge for the Assyrian: The Great Oppressor* (Salop: W. Laplain, 1770), p. 29.

70 *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* ('The Egyptian Gospel'), in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 109.

of the Godhead dwells in both . . .'.[71] Blake writes in *Vala, or The Four Zoas* of 'that one man | They call Jesus, the Christ;'[72] (E, p. 311) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) whom Blake at first admired but later scorned, writes, 'Man is God, and God Man'.[73]

We may see the entire matter as a question of the degree and extent of divine immanence (a transcendent God is a God who is utterly separate from and beyond this world; an immanent God is a God who is in the natural world we all know). Complete immanence gives pantheism. Orthodox Christianity allows a temporary and local immanence in the Incarnation of Christ: God, at a particular point in history, was made flesh and dwelt among us in the body of an individual man. This gives an orthodox entry into the notion, 'God–man'. But an intermediate conception of immanence, between the generality of pantheism and the particularity of the Incarnation, can give the doctrine, 'Every human being is divine', or, as Blake says, 'the Human Form Divine' ('A Divine Image', 3, E, p. 32). Bauthumley passes from general pantheism to an intensified conception of divinity-in-humanity within a single page:

> Nay I see God in all Creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivey on the wall; and that God is the life and being of them all, and that God doth really dwell, if you will personally; if he may admit so low an expression in them all, and hath his Being nowhere else out of the Creatures . . .
>
> Every Creature and thing having that Being living in it, and there is no difference betwixt Man or Beast; but as Man carries a more lovely Image of the divine Being than any other Creature: For I see the Power, Wisdom, and Glory of God in one, as well as another, onely in that Creature called Man, God appears more gloriously in then the rest.[74]

Note the express denial of transcendence in the words 'nowhere else'. Bauthumley's reference to the ivy on the wall

[71] *The Relation of a Public Discourse in Maries Church at Oxford between Mr Cheynel and Mr Erbery, Jan 11, 1646*, printed in *The Testimony of William Erbery*, p. 8.

[72] The proper textual location of these lines is problematic. In *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. Stevenson, p. 301, they are at i. 186–7.

[73] *The True Christian Religion*, II. vii (London: Swedenborg Society, 1867), pp. 103–4 (or p. 126; two page-numbering systems are used in this edn.).

[74] *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (1650), in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 232.

recalls Holland's scornful remarks about those who would find the essence of God 'as much in the ivie leaf as in the most glorious angel'.[75] It is evident, however, that Bauthumley does after all admit degrees of God's presence, since he is more fully present in man (who becomes forthwith angelic) than in brute nature: 'man lives in the Angelicall nature, and the Angels are also spirituall and in man . . .'[76] The move towards an internalized, psychologized Christianity is far advanced. Here, as so often, Bauthumley is able to cite from Scripture a text which seems to express at once the full radical doctrine: 'The kingdom of God is within you', Luke 17: 21 (Bauthumley substitutes 'Heaven' for 'God').[77]

E. P. Thompson has remarked that, in the doctrine of the Trinity offered by seventeenth-century Muggletonians, God is effectively transmuted into Christ.[78] John Reeve wrote, 'There is no other God but the Man Jesus . . . the eternal God, the Man of Glory, who is a distinct God in the person of Man . . . they cannot take the Sword of Steel to slay their Brother, because they know that Man is the Image of God.'[79] Thomas Tomkinson, another Muggletonian, maintained 'that God ever was and will be, in the Form of a Man'.[80] It is clear that Tomkinson was drawn to this conclusion partly because of his philosophical opposition to mind–body dualism: 'Where would mercy and justice, meekness and humility be found? There could be no such virtues known, or have being, were they not found to center in a body'.[81] Moral characteristics inhering in a transcendent, bodiless, divine mind are simply inconceivable to him. Blake, talking to Crabb Robinson in the winter of 1825, said, when he was asked in what light he viewed the great question concerning the divinity of Christ, '*He is the only God*', and added, 'And so am I and so are you'.[82] When Marlowe makes Faustus, just before he is hurled down to everlasting torture, cry out 'My God, my God, look not so fierce

75 See above, p. 201.

76 *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 239. 77 Ibid., p. 236.

78 *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 79.

79 *Sacred Remains* (n.d.), p. 83, cited in *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 157.

80 Cited ibid., p. 160. 81 Cited ibid.

82 *The Blake Records*, ed. G. E. Bentley Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 310.

on me', Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matthew 27: 46) is overtaken, I have suggested, by an intuition that God is present after all, and is identical with the Devil. Blake in his Preface ('To the Deists') to *Jerusalem* writes, 'Man must & will have some Religion; if he has not the Religion of Jesus, he will have the Religion of Satan, & will erect the Synagogue of Satan, calling the Prince of this World, God . . . This was the Religion of the Pharisees who murdered Jesus' (E, pp. 198–9). We may notice in 'synagogue' and 'Pharisees' an ideological anti-semitism which recalls the anti-semitism we have already seen among early Gnostics. Saturninus said, 'Christ came to destroy the God of the Jews'.[83] Blake said that 'Christ came to destroy the Jewish imposture' and that 'the Jewish Scriptures' are 'an Example of the wickedness & deceit of the Jews & were written as an example of the possibility of Human Beastliness in all its branches' (annotations to Watson's *Apology*, E, p. 604). Compare the lines,

> The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
> Is my Visions Greatest Enemy
> Thine has a great hook nose like thine
> Mine has a snub nose like to mine . . .
>
> ('The Everlasting Gospel', E, p. 524)

Elsewhere in the same notebook Blake wrote, 'I always thought that Jesus Christ was a snubby or I should not have worshipt him if I thought he had been one of those long spindle nosed rascals' (E, p. 673). The tyrannical Father of the Jews in now the enemy of the Son. Here, if you like, Blake's Christ and Marlowe's Faustus are both atheists in the old sense of the term, 'opposed to God'. Blake, however, both cooled and, philosophically, intensified the situation by making Christ an atheist in the modern sense of the word. Thinking, unquestionably, of that same cry of dereliction which has haunted orthodox Christianity like a bad dream, he wrote, 'Christ died as an unbeliever' (annotations to Watson's *Apology*, E, p. 614).

When I first began to think about Blake and libertine Gnosticism I was worried by what seemed to be yawning gaps

[83] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I. xxiv. 2, ed. Rousseau, vol. i, pp. 322–4.

in the written record. The similarities of Blake's ideas (and those of the Ranters a century earlier), to those of the Gnostics more than a thousand years before are both striking and detailed, but the transmission of these ideas seemed deeply problematic. But there is really no problem here. Blake could have known about the early Gnostics in a number of ways. Gibbon gives a run-down on them in his immensely famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (chapter xlvii. 2). Andrew Welburn observes that Blake knew the *Hermetica* in John Everard's translation of 1649.[84] Nathaniel Lardner's *The History of Heretics of the Two First Centuries after Christ*, 1780,[85] was to hand. J. L. Mosheim's gigantic and detailed *Ecclesiastical History* was translated into English in 1758–68. Mosheim gives a full account of the 'unsupportable arrogance' of the Gnostic Demiurge and of the Ophitic identification of the serpent in Genesis with Christ.[86] John Bellamy's *Ophion: Or the Theology of the Serpent* (1811) is for the most part orthodox but there are moments when he can sound like a Gnostic Ophite: 'It has been the custom of the most ancient nations, as we learn from the pagan writers, to consider the serpent as the symbol of wisdom, circumspection, and intelligence, of the sensual principle in man'.[87] Bellamy, incidentally, mentions the Ophites by name.[88] Mosheim, meanwhile, was equally interested in the Libertines of the sixteenth century, attributing to them such sentiments as that, since God was the immediate cause of all human actions, 'Distinctions of *good* and *evil* . . . established with respect to these actions, were false and groundless', so that all were 'allowed to indulge, without exception or restraint, their appetites and passions'.[89]

Somehow I find it difficult to imagine Blake reading Mosheim, but it is a curious fallacy of 'rigorous scholarship' to suppose that all knowledge is acquired by reading, as if writers in earlier centuries were confined to cells and communicated

84 'The Gnostic Imagination of William Blake', appendix, A28.

85 Printed in *The Works of Nathaniel Lardner*, 11 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1788), vol. ix. See esp. pp. 272–3.

86 *An Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Maclaine, vol. i, pp. 67, 72, 189–90.

87 London: to be sold by Hatchard *et al.*, p. 11.

88 Ibid., pp. 16, 17.

89 *An Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Maclaine, vol. iv, pp. 122–3.

through some inter-library loan system. They talked. Blake could easily have talked to someone who had read Mosheim, even if he had not read it himself. Stuart Curran points out that, in addition to Gibbon and Mosheim, Bayle's *Dictionary*, Isaac de Beausobre's *Historie* [*sic*] *critique de Manichée et Manichéisme*, Nathaniel Lardner (whom we have already noticed), Joseph Priestley, and perhaps Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* could all have provided Blake with information about the early Gnostics.[90] We could add to these Constantin Volney's *The Ruins: or, A Survey of the Ruins of Empire*, translated into English in 1792, with its pronounced hostility to Moses and its deep interest in a quasi-Gnostic solipsistic Creator believed in by the ancient Egyptians.[91] William Hurd is yet another possible source. His *New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies and Customs of the Whole World*[92] does not feel culturally remote from Blake as Mosheim does. Indeed we know that a number of Blake's fellow engravers were employed in the production of this book.[93] In J. Bryant's *Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774–6) there were plates devoted to the Ophites.[94] Alexander Gilchrist, who talked to people who had talked to Blake, writes almost casually about the similarity of Blake's thought to that of the Gnostics as if he assumes that the reader will catch on at once.[95]

The more one reads, the clearer it becomes that the tracing of close verbal connections is in a way beside the point, that we are dealing with a *philosophia perennis* or persistent body of live thought, maintained both by writing and by enthusiastic talk continuously through the centuries. These things never die. People used to think that Muggletonians vanished from the

90 'Blake and the Gnostic Hyle: A Double Negative', *Blake Studies*, 4 (1972), pp. 117–33, esp. p. 122.

91 See Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 179, 196.

92 London: Alexander Hogg, 1788.

93 See Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, p. xvii.

94 See John Beer, *Blake's Visionary Universe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), p. 23. Robert N. Essick in his *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 117, says that there is a 'good possibility' that Blake himself worked on the plates, but adds that he cannot determine the extent of his involvement 'with any degree of certainty'.

95 Life of Blake, vol. i, p. 373.

face of England in the seventeenth century. Then it was allowed that they persisted into the eighteenth. Then William Lamont and E. P. Thompson found a live Muggletonian in the twentieth century. After the death of this person, E. P. Thompson wrote movingly about 'the last Muggletonian', Mr Philip Noakes.[96] As I write these words I have just heard on the radio that three more living Muggletonians have come to light.

I have laid considerable stress on the Ranters of the seventeenth century but just as strong a case, as far as mere similarity of doctrine is concerned, can be made for connections with certain sects in continental Europe, extending back into the medieval period. The moderate Swiss reformer, Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75) speaks of a sect of 'holy and sinless Baptists' who claimed that the soul, in given circumstances, is not responsible for the sins of the body and therefore omitted 'Forgive us our trespasses' when they recited the Paternoster, adding also that some of the 'Free Brothers', pushing ultra-supernaturalism to its limit, would have it that, while women certainly sinned if they had intercourse with their husbands (those, that is, that were still heathens) they committed no sin in having intercourse with the brethren.[97] One Jorg Zaunring, an Anabaptist, is recorded as having held 'the married state for sin'—not from a monastic but from a libertine point of view.[98] In the fourteenth century the Brethren of the Free Spirit taught that 'Nothing is sin except what is thought of as sin . . . all that my nature desires I satisfy'.[99] Here, fascinatingly, mere consciousness, or self-consciousness, is made the site of sin, as in developed Romanticism. Meanwhile, 'following nature' was of course a maxim of the Ranters. Those who would trace the thread still further back may consult the variously sensationalist account of 'Luciférians', Manichaeans, Catharists and Turlupins in Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* (especially pages 100–1). Norman Cohn finds in the Brethren of the Free Spirit the kind of psychologizing or internalizing of theology which happened in seventeenth-century English sects: 'heaven and hell were

96 *Witness Against the Beast*, pp. 115 ff.

97 See Knox, *Enthusiasm*, p. 136.

98 Richard Heath, *Anabaptism from its Rise at Zwickau to its Fall at Münster* (London: Alexander & Shepheard, 1895), p. 59.

99 See Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 178.

merely states of the soul in this world'.[100] The Bohemian Adamites of the fifteenth century held that the chaste could not have eternal life.[101]

If, on the other hand, we move forward in time from the Ranters we enter the eighteenth century, a period which at first looks unpromisingly moderate, sensible, and rational. It is likely, however, that in certain chapels and conventicles (and also ale-houses) the tradition continued. James Blake, William Blake's father, probably became a Baptist in the mid-1760s.[102] Stanley Gardner, in a chapter called 'Blake's Westminster', notes that Anabaptists and Independents worshipped in the streets near Golden Square[103] (Blake was born at 28 Broad Street, very close to Golden Square), but James King insists that there is no direct evidence of Blake's involvement with Antinomian sects.[104] This may be true, but it remains entirely reasonable to turn the question round and affirm that it would be odd indeed if Blake heard no talk of such matters. E. P. Thompson has heaped up evidence of Anti-Enlightenment Rosicrucians, Philadelphians, and Behmenists in late eighteenth-century England and has drawn attention to the manner in which Dissenting academies were centres of alternative culture.[105] This can be supplemented with Masonic rituals, Millenarian astrology, and Swedenborgian teaching. Then add in private family traditions and the thing becomes credible. Thompson finds a veritable explosion of anti-rationalism in the 1780s. The Church of Christ in Spitalfields which 'surfaces from time to time in eighteenth century London' maintained that the sins of all its members had been blotted out, 'so that they are now holy and unblamable and unreproveable in the eye of his justice'.[106] Thompson also turns the tables interestingly on Kathleen Raine's Platonizing account of Blake's thought in her *Blake and Tradition* (1968), by showing that radical Protestant works of the seventeenth century were just as available in London bookshops as the high-culture works she cites.[107] Thompson

[100] Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 173. [101] Ibid., p. 220.
[102] See James King, *William Blake: His Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991), p. 4. [103] *Blake* (London: Evans Bros, 1968), p. 21.
[104] *William Blake: His Life*, p. 5 n. 9
[105] *Witness Against the Beast*, esp. pp. xiv–xv. [106] Ibid., p. 18.
[107] Ibid., p. 41.

concedes, however, that Behmenite doctrine lost its radical edge in the eighteenth century.[108] But the main quarry of this book, the exaltation of Christ, the divine man, over the Father, can certainly be found. Robert Hindmarsh, who was connected with the rising Church of Jerusalem in the late eighteenth century, saw the words, 'Christ is God' chalked on many walls in London in the 1780s.[109] When Robert Southey, pretending to be one Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, reported on a visit to the Jerusalem Church, he said that 'Christ in his *divine*, or in his *glorified human*, was repeatedly addressed as the only God'.[110] Swedenborgians reconstructed the Trinity *inside* the person of Christ and then affirmed that the same triple structure is found within every human being.[111] William Hurd, whose *New Universal History* we have already noticed, describes antinomian Christians in the late eighteenth century meeting every Sunday in public houses and becoming very excited in their talk: 'Everything is said that can possibly be thought of against holiness or good works'.[112]

J. Bellamy's *Jesus Christ the Only God*,[113] a work written against Priestley, appeared in 1792. The title here looks promising but the book is in almost every respect an apologia for the orthodox Trinity as the subtitle makes clear: 'being a Defence of that fundamental Doctrine of the Christian Religion against Arianism and Socinianism, addressed to Dr Priestley'. In order to combat the Arian subordination of Christ, Bellamy is obliged indeed to raise him, but this does not result in a Gnostic antagonism between the Son and the Creator but rather in a fusion of the two. On the title-page all this is strongly asserted. Bellamy cites John 1: 1–3, 'In the Beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and THE WORD WAS GOD—ALL THINGS WERE MADE BY HIM, and without him was not any thing made that was made', and adds, 'He who created the World, and all things therein, is GOD–CHRIST created the World, and all things therein—Therefore, CHRIST IS GOD.' On page 12 he attacks the Carpocratians, and on page 104 (lest we

[108] Ibid., p. 46. [109] Ibid., p. 144.
[110] Letter lxii, in *Letters from England* [1807], ed. Jack Simmonds (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), p. 380.
[111] *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 146. [112] p. 641.
[113] London: sold by Mr Sibley.

should ever suppose that in making Christ the Creator he is somehow displacing the God of Moses) he gives a most un-Blakean account of the Mosaic Ten Commandments. Like his other book, *Ophion*, which seemed to promise Gnostic serpent-worship and then gave little, *Jesus Christ the Only God* is not a work to rattle the Established Church.

It may be said that we are still faced with an awkward interval between, say, on the one hand, the Millenarian Camisards or 'New Jerusalem' groups in London in 1707–10 and G. C. Galton's account of nudist Adamites and sinless Ranters in *The Post-Boy Robbed of his Mail* (1706),[114] and, on the other hand, the surge of subversive theology some seventy or eighty years later. One might cite, as bridging this gap, Moravians (who, like Blake, venerated the genitalia[115]). These were derived from the Bohemian Brethren, a group which formally separated from the Church in 1467 and owed some allegiance to that fiercely independent spirit admired by Marlowe, John Huss, who was burned at the stake in 1415. The Moravian Peter Bohler established a 'religious society' in Fetter Lane in London in 1738. In truth, the web extends indefinitely. It is scarcely surprising that an 'underground' anti-theology should, for certain periods, be invisible to the eye of posterity. I have no doubt that, when print gave out, talk persisted.

And the talk was partly Gnostic. We shall come later to Blake's lyric, 'I saw a chapel all of gold' (E, p. 458), in which a glittering, magnificent place of religion is penetrated and violated by a serpent. Leopold Damrosch felt able to set aside the 'good snake' of the Ophites when he read this poem. The Gnostics, he explains,

> held that the true God was an alien God, in a far-off-heaven and that the Gnostic elect ('pneumatics', filled with spirit) were likewise as alien to our world as beings from outer space, which indeed they literally were, having fallen from the remote heavens. In the expressive French translation of the term, man is *l'étranger*. Blake never believed that. He always longed for the renovation of the world we know.[116]

[114] Cited in Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, pp. 54 and 55.

[115] See Jack Lindsay, *William Blake: His Life and Work* (London: Constable, 1978), pp. 275–6.

[116] *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 257.

Damrosch is too confident. We have seen enough to know that other-worldly Gnostics can easily become libertine affirmers of nature and, contrariwise, Blake himself meanwhile retains, as an important part of his intellectual make-up, the original Gnostic contempt for the physical world. It is the basis of his opposition to Wordsworth. He told Crabb Robinson, 'The eloquent descriptions of Nature in Wordsworth's poems were Conclusive proof of Atheism, for whoever believes in Nature, said B: disbelieves in God—For Nature is the work of the Devil'.[117] This is the purest, primary Gnosticism. The Blake who affirmed sexual freedom and found beauty in human genitalia also, over and over again, attacked the senses, denying their capacity to convey truth. He clearly desired social revolution but he is, by a very long distance, further removed from practical subversion than, say, the Fifth Monarchy Men of the seventeenth century. Jon Mee is right to find Painite political radicalism everywhere in the Prophetic Books,[118] but the *method* of the Prophetic Books—the ramifying mythology—decisively insulates them from political efficacy.

Blake's poem *Milton* is indeed more radical in its political ideology than Milton's own *Paradise Lost*. Yet Milton remains the real English revolutionary figuring in the history books as Blake does not. Milton was within an ace of being disembowelled by the public hangman. There is a world of difference between this degree of peril and Blake's half-comic appearance in court in Chichester in 1803, accused by one Scofield of saying 'Damn the King' and adding that the king's soldiers were all slaves. Blake, who was in a great state of anxiety before the trial, was able to call witnesses who agreed that he had said no such thing, and he was acquitted to uproarious applause.[119] The odd thing is that the remarks attributed to Blake do sound very Blakean. Could Scofield have drawn on local gossip? Or (dare one say it?) could Blake and his witnesses have lied? I once heard a scholar argue very plausibly that the despised Sir Joshua Reynolds (Blake's pet hate), with all his 'politeness', actually did more for the status of the working

117 *The Blake Records*, ed. Bentley, p. 545.
118 *Dangerous Enthusiasm*.
119 See Wilson, *The Life of William Blake*, pp. 175–7.

artist than Blake ever did. The suggestion was not well received by the audience. Blake's movement into the labyrinthine subjectivism of the Prophetic Books can be seen as a withdrawal from the world of action into a transcendentalist privacy. Damrosch sees Blake as embodying the great, this-worldly Antithesis to other-worldly Gnosticism. In fact early Gnosticism and Blake's own writings are, alike, dialectical, containing both thesis and antithesis, in tense relation.

(III) Blake and Milton

Blake's poem *Milton* presents a different view of the author of *Paradise Lost* from that offered in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, composed some years before. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* we are told that energy, wrongly called evil, is really the supreme good, and conversely that rational passivity, commonly regarded as virtuous, is really evil. Because in *Paradise Lost* Satan is active and hell a site of energy, the diabolical principle is exalted, and because God is rational he is downgraded. All this, Blake reckons, is already there, in the poem: 'The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is, because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it' (E, p. 35). Milton the poet, then, backs Satan.

But in *Milton* all this is reversed. Milton is now the declared enemy. He has shown us a God beyond the sky who is a tyrannical dispenser of law, not the friend or brother of mankind. Blake chooses as his epigraph Milton's proud words of theodicy, 'To Justify the Ways of God to Men'. The prose Preface, which follows, attacks polite, classical learning and upholds 'the Sublime of the Bible': One senses that Blake is ranting, is below his best form, but then, without warning, we come to the most famous lines he ever wrote:

> And did those feet in ancient time
> Walk upon Englands mountains green:
> And was the holy Lamb of God,
> On Englands pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green and pleasant land.

(E, pp. 95–6)

It is often said that ordinary people who sing these words in churches, at football matches, or walking home on summer nights, cannot possibly understand them, but I am not sure that is true. Just as W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming' blazes in the minds of thousands of readers while the arcane technicalities of *A Vision* (supposed to be a 'key' to the poem) baffle commentators, so here the extraordinary visionary force of the writing reaches the common reader. Ordinary people feel that they are being given back the England they know, but that, while this green familiar place is—or was once—irradiated by eternity, it is now a place of Satanic mills. The 'mills' are usually imagined as blackened factories. Most overwhelmingly of all, the poem suggests that Christ might have come to England. I say 'have come' but the strange simultaneity of the line which gives us Jerusalem rising *among* the mills suggests a timeless presence, after all, overtaking the myth of loss and descent. All of this is basically correct. Even if the great cotton mills of Lancashire had not yet been built when Blake wrote *Milton*, there were water-mills and treadmills. The matter is effectively clinched by Peter Ackroyd's demonstration that Blake must regularly have walked past a certain 'Albion Mill', when he lived in London. This was a mechanized factory (run on steam-engines). In Blake's time it was a burned-out, blackened shell. When the mill was destroyed in 1791 the millers of Blackfriars Bridge Road rejoiced; one placard read, 'Success

to the mills of ALBION but no Albion Mills'.[120] This rhetorical counterpointing of the idea of Albion, the primal England, with mechanized drudgery would have stuck like an arrow in Blake's mind. There mere telling of the story makes one feel that one is entering a Blake poem. New Critics used to maintain that knowledge of an author's life could not affect literary interpretation of the work. Surely Ackroyd's demonstration makes it a little harder to exclude the interpretation, 'factories'? They err who insist, antiseptically, on a wholly metaphorical meaning for 'mills'.

The 'Arrows of desire' suggest a glorified sexuality figuring as part of a promised revolution. As I write this I find that I am simply recounting what the poem meant to me when I was 14 years old, before I knew anything of Blake's metaphysical system. The biblical resonances which can become vacuous elsewhere in Blake are here marvellously managed. W. H. Auden, as we saw, believed that the human race is divided into two kinds, Arcadians who locate happiness in the past and Utopians who locate it in the future; the former conceive the Happy Place as green, pastoral (Eden, the fair field of Enna); the latter conceive it as a city to be built with strenuous labour, the new Jerusalem. Political activists come from the second camp. Blake's poem combines the two with dream-like intensity, the green England trodden by the feet of Christ when he came with Joseph of Arimathea, as the old story runs, and the holy city we shall build together when tyranny and oppression are obliterated from this happy land.

'The old story' is—deliberately—a vague expression. Blake's lyric, 'Jerusalem' makes no mention of Joseph of Arimathea, and the prominent medieval legend of Joseph coming to these shores makes him bring with him the Holy Grail, containing the blood of the crucified Christ, that is to say, it places the visit after the death of Christ. The anonymous author of the earliest surviving *Life* of St Dunstan, known as 'Priest B', writes of an older church at Glastonbury, *nulla hominum arte constructam*, 'built by no human skill'.[121] The passage has been seized eagerly as showing that God himself must have come to

[120] Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 130.
[121] *Memorials of Saint Dunstan*, ed. William Stubbs (London: HMSO,1874), p. 7.

England to build the church, but the words could simply refer to some story of a sudden miracle; certainly they do not clearly corroborate the much more circumstantial story of Christ's journey to England. Lionel Smithett Lewis, the vicar of Glastonbury, wrote in the 1920s, 'Perhaps there is some truth in the strange tradition which still lingers, not only among the hill folk of Somerset but of Gloucestershire, that St Joseph of Arimathea came to Britain first as a metal merchant . . . and that Our Lord Himself came with him as a boy'.[122] The existence of a strong oral tradition is amply confirmed by H. A. Lewis, who cites an old Cornish hymn, 'Joseph was a Tin-man' and a proverb 'As sure as Our Lord was at Priddy'.[123] Priddy is a village high on the Mendip Hills near Glastonbury. The trouble with purely oral tradition, of course, is that it cannot be tracked far into the past. Lionel Smithett Lewis thought that Blake had somehow heard of the oral tradition, but it is impossible to demonstrate that it existed in Blake's time. Lewis's obvious, breathless desire to believe the story is met by an entire absence of clinching evidence. But a question still hangs in the air. Which is more likely, that those rustics who in the early twentieth century spoke of Jesus coming with Joseph to England got the story from Blake, or that Blake got the story from an earlier phase of similar oral tradition? It may be objected that the manner in which the question is posed unfairly biases our minds in favour of the second alternative by tacitly suppressing the possibility that Blake may have exerted *indirect* influence; the rustics may not have been great readers and this suggests indeed that they would not have been scanning Blake's *Milton*, but, meanwhile, they might have talked to persons who had talked to other persons who had talked to other persons who *had* read Blake's *Milton*. But there are elements in the oral tradition, the figure of Joseph, the notion that he was a tin merchant, which are absent entirely from Blake's poem, the one admittedly famous thing he wrote. But Joseph is not far away. In other much more obscure writings of Blake—writings moreover which seem implicitly relevant to

[122] *Glastonbury, 'The Mother of Saints'—Her Saints* (Bristol: St Stephen's Press, 1925), p. 65. Cf. the same author's *St Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury, or The Apostolical Church of Britain* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1931), p. 18.

[123] *Christ in Cornwall* (Glastonbury: W. H. Smith, 1946), pp. 5 and 14.

'Did those feet?'—we find him. That an unlettered constituency should somehow contrive a means of unifying these arcane materials after Blake's time seems altogether less likely than the converse account: that Blake is alluding to a pre-existing story. One of the earliest engravings we have from the hand of Blake depicts 'Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion'.[124] It belongs to the year 1773, when Blake was 16. Although my guess (and it could quite easily be wrong) is that the story of Christ coming to England goes back before the time of Blake, I do not believe that it was current in medieval England. The pages of William of Malmesbury would have been full of it, if it had been available (what better selling-point, to bring the pilgrims in?).

We must not forget the relevance, in all this, of Milton. Milton's writings conveyed to readers who came after him the sense of an immense analogy between the English and the Jews; each, in their way, is the Chosen People of God.[125] Moses, evoked at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, is to the 'chosen seed' of Israel as Milton will be to the people of England (i. 8). In *Areopagitica* Milton wrote, 'Why else was this Nation chos'n before any other, that out of her as out of *Sion* should be proclaim'd and sounded forth the first tidings of the Reformation to all Europe?'(*CPW*, vol. ii, p. 552). In Blake the idea intensifies, to the point of historical displacement. Milton, who revered Moses, makes England parallel to Israel. Blake, who hated Moses, makes England replace Israel. His druidical studies had led him to the idea that England was the original Zion, the Holy Land: 'All things Begin & End in Albion's Ancient Druid Rocky Shore' (*Jerusalem*, Plate 27, E, p. 169). Albion's history, he affirmed, 'Preceded that of the Hebrews' (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E, p. 548). Blake may have thought that the pillars of Jerusalem first stood, quite literally, between Islington and Marylebone:

> The fields from Islington to Marybone
> To Primrose Hill and Saint Johns Wood:
> Were builded over with pillars of gold,
> And there Jerusalems pillars stood.

[124] The picture is reproduced in *William Blake's Writings*, ed. Bentley, vol. i, p. 643.

[125] See A. L. Owen, *The Famous Druids* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 224 and 235.

Her Little-ones ran on the fields
The Lamb of God among them seen
And fair Jerusalem his Bride:
Among the little meadows green

(*Jerusalem*, Plate 27, E, p. 171)

To say that Blake may have believed this literally is not to deny that the notion may carry, by metaphor, a further significance. In Erich Auerbach's terms it is Figura rather than Allegoria, that is to say, a story deemed to be true but at the same time charged, objectively, with further meaning.[126]

Somehow, despite the hard opposition proposed by Auden, the city imagined in 'Did those feet?' does not jar with the pastoral landscape as do the dark Satanic mills; rather the shining towers rise in imagination from flowery fields, as do the visionary pinnacles in *The Adoration of the Lamb* by the brothers Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, in Ghent. Blake actually succeeds in investing the imminent war with innocence. Even the arrows of desire are innocent.

It is deeply appropriate that this lyric should stand at the entrance to a poem about Milton. Milton is the poet of England who risked his life in opposition to the tyranny of king and bishop. That is why 'Jerusalem', sung at Promenade concerts, loved by the people of England, has always been a faintly uncomfortable possession for Anglican Conservatives. Its love of England is not a contented love, but combines grief and anger for terrible wrongs with reformist hope. In the nineteenth century it was thought paradoxical that Milton should be a Royalist in heaven and a Republican on earth. C. S. Lewis patiently explained how Milton would have thought obedience properly due to God the Father because of his real superiority and how this is entirely consistent with a refusal to obey a mere fellow human being, having no such natural superiority.[127] But we have seen that there is reason to doubt the full efficacy of this answer. If God willed the strenuous freedom attained by Adam and Eve, then God must have given birth, within his own nature, to a second self, a self who loves freedom and endorses

[126] See 'Figura' in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1959), pp. 11–78.

[127] *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, pp. 73–4.

the breaking of the commandments laid on man by the earlier paternal deity. The Christ we see in *Paradise Lost* is a mere shadow. But because the 'second self' born from the father is clearly analogous to Christ, we can say that a more violent implicit Christology is beginning to form. I have said that Milton, unlike Blake, revered Moses, but this is not certainly true of Milton's emergent Christology. This implied movement within the godhead is of incalculable importance. Milton in *De Doctrina Christiana* is actually very like Blake in his attitude to the Ten Commandments given to the Children of Israel by Moses. They are utterly abolished by Christianity and literal adherence to them is inconsistent with Church liberty (*DDC* II. i, pp. 639–40). Here the second self of God merges with the Christ of Protestants and dethrones the 'first self'. 'Did those feet?' is therefore a profoundly Protestant, anti-monarchical, restlessly antithetical poem. It is deeply nationalist but the nationalism is of the Miltonic, un-complacent kind.

But Blake in *Milton* sees the epic poet, not as he sees him in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* but as the poet of the unregenerate Father. The poem proper begins with the narrative of Satan's fall. The reader of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* expects a heroic Satan, a figure of demonic energy, but the signals are confused. Satan in *Paradise Lost* 'thought himself impaired' when the Messiah was honoured by the Father (v. 665). Blake's Satan is resentful of his brother Palamabron, and entreats his father, Los, to give him Palamabron's rank and place:

> with incomparable mildness:
> His primitive tyrannical attempts on Los: with most endearing love
> He soft entreated Los to give him Palamabrons station
>
> (*Milton*, Plate 7, lines 4–6, E, p. 100)

The collision of epithets is almost mind-numbing. The only way to resolve it seems to be to take the loving mildness as hypocritical pretence and the references thereto as harshly ironic. The whole becomes much more intelligible if one sees it, as W. H. Stevenson suggests, as expressing Blake's irritation with his patron Hayley's interference in the poetic process.[128]

[128] In *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. Stevenson, p. 496.

But this is very much a rescue operation mounted *ab extra* by commentators. The poetry itself gives no hint that we have covertly shifted to the sarcasms of ordinary, human literary squabbles.

Los, in response to Satan's complaint, places his left sandal on his head (*Milton*, Plate 8, line 11, E, p. 101). The immediate effect is simply one of insanity, Los and the poet both deranged. 'Left' is *sinister* in Latin, and the placing of the shoe on the head may be an image of monstrous, unnatural inversion ('My foot my tutor!' Prospero cries when his daughter Miranda answers back, *Tempest*, I. ii. 469). A period of grief follows: 'They Plow'd in tears! incessant pourd Johovah's rain . . .' (*Milton*, Plate 8, 27, E, p.102). Then, exactly as in *Vala, or The Four Zoas* (viii. 358 ff., E, p. 380) Enitharmon encloses Satan within a lunar space, a dim cold void. Satan now becomes a figure of wrath:

> For Satan flaming with Rintrahs fury hidden beneath his own mildness
> Accus'd Palamabron before the Assembly of ingratitude! of malice
> He created Seven deadly Sins drawing out his infernal scroll,
> Of Moral laws and cruel punishments upon the clouds of Jehovah
> To pervert the Divine voice in its entrance to the earth
> With thunder of war & trumpets sound, with armies of disease
> Punishments & deaths musterd & number'd; Saying I am God alone
> There is no other!
>
> (*Milton*, Plate 9, lines 19–26, E, p. 103)

At last all is clear. This is not the good Satan who opposed the tyrannical Father. This Satan is the Father himself, who is here called Satan according to the old, basic meaning of the name, 'the Enemy'.

The reader may be confused, but once the double language of Blake's ethical discourse is understood, it can be followed without too much difficulty: the word *good* can either mean 'good as that term is used by learned divines', in which case it denotes evil, or else *good* can mean '*really* good', in which case it will involve all those anarchic energies condemned by learned divines. So far, there is no contradiction with the views expressed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. There, as here,

the Mosaic Father is the Enemy. 'I am God alone, | There is no other' is a rewording of the first of the Ten Commandments, every one of which was to be broken by Christ (so Blake claimed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in T*he Everlasting Gospel*[129]). 'I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20: 2–3 cf. Deuteronomy 5: 6–7). The preceding story, despite its light echoing of the Miltonic account of Lucifer's fall, is a Gnostic 'pre-cosmogony'. 'Satan–Jehovah', finding himself in the zone of earth, builds mills among the temples of Albion, the primal England. Now, to be sure, the mills are generalized images of oppression, but even here it is no great sin to imagine a treadmill. We are next told how the Druids learned to perform ghastly human sacrifices (*Milton*, Plate 11, lines 6-14, E, p. 104). Finally the bard finishes his song with the story of Leutha, which I do not understand. Milton, in the heaven of Albion, hearing the song of the bard, rises up in indignation; he 'ungirded himself from the oath of God' and called out. 'O when Lord Jesus wilt thou come?' (Plate 14, lines 13 and 18, E, p. 108). Milton, having bowed down before the tyrant in *Paradise Lost*, now learns his error.

He then descends from the false heaven to the mortal world, to Albion, England. He alights in the form of a star or ray of light, striking Blake's left foot:

> Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star,
> Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;
> And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there . . .
>
> (Plate 15, lines 47–9, E, p. 110)

At first a black cloud forms as if Milton, for all his earlier sudden reaction, still bears within him a Urizenic miasma, but then the experience becomes glorious:

> And all this Vegetable World appeard on my left Foot,
> As a bright sandal formd immortal of precious stones & gold:
> I stooped down & bound it on to walk forward thro' Eternity
>
> (Plate 21, 12-14, E, p.115)

[129] See above, p. 5.

The earlier reference to a left sandal, the sandal placed by Los on his own head, was too crazy to work as poetry, for this reader at least. But the entry of Milton into William Blake's foot, though similarly bizarre, is haunting and beautiful. W. H. Stevenson conjectures that it is based on a personal experience[130] and I would like to think that this is so. We may suppose an accident. Light happened to fall on Blake's foot as he was thinking of Milton and the meaning of *Paradise Lost*. To reconstruct an event as the genesis of poetry in this way is to see it as one of those moments of inexplicable actuality which we find first, perhaps, in Puritan autobiographies. We may think of Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and of the visitations of Grace (itself unearned, inexplicable) described in that book. It is psychologically plausible that, if the light indeed happened to fall as we have guessed, in Blake's mind the chance event would flower and branch into the mythological structures of *Milton*. Marvellously, contact is retained with the originative moment, itself almost *absurdiste* in its enigmatic particularity. Sir Thomas Browne, the Anglican author of *Religio Medici*, never offers this kind of biographically localized epiphany. Bunyan in *Grace Abounding* on the other hand tells of moments, as when he saw rooks in a field or puddles in a road.[131] We hardly know why but as readers we are grateful. The reader of Blake's Prophetic Books is seriously starved of such strangely concrete disclosures, but the poem *Milton* has both the episode of the star entering the foot and another magnificent epiphany: 'There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find' (Plate 35, line 42, E, p. 136), the moment of the wild thyme and the song of the lark ascending.

New Critics, if any are still to be found, will say that I am illicitly stepping outside the text, that I am drawing from the extraneous world of biographical fact an empirical concreteness which happens to be more to my taste than pure, unconstrained, metaphysical mythopoeia. But that is not so. Blake's own writing, within the poem, demands a willingness to infer key events. Blake wants us to understand that he was visited, at a certain time and place, by the poet Milton. The poem also

130 *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. Stevenson, p. 487.
131 *Grace Abounding*, sections 92 and 51, ed. Sharrock, pp. 30 and 19.

makes us aware that he had other visitors, of a less august character. For example at Plate 36, lines 17–20 (E, p. 137) we are told how a 12-year-old girl—presumably a perfectly real neighbour of Blake's—came into the garden at Felpham. In Blake's imagination the figures merge with each other and with the intermediate Ololon, but we shall miss the proper impact of this 'visionary actuality' if we do not allow into our minds the thought of the little girl, whose name we shall probably never know, who walked through Blake's own garden gate.

Milton shows the author of *Paradise Lost* as having given his allegiance while he lived to the false tyrant God. It has little to say about Milton's most fiery creation, Lucifer, the figure who is all-important in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The difference between the two works, however, certainly does not amount to full contradiction. In the famous sentence in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake had said that Milton was of the Devil's party 'without knowing it'; the implication is clearly that Milton's conscious mind was on the side of God the Father. The poem *Milton* merely explores that act of misplaced conscious allegiance. The idea, proclaimed in the earlier work, that at the deepest level Milton the poet and Blake the poet are on the same side, is powerfully implicit throughout the poem *Milton*. Within the poem Milton is never a mere brute instrument of Urizen; he has that in him which enables him to repent, so that his falling within the mundane shell of generation to find Blake is not simply a falling; it is also an exaltation, both for himself and for the later prophet–poet. It is clear to the reader of *Milton*, as it is to the reader of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that in writing about the author of *Paradise Lost* Blake was writing about a great fellow-spirit, Albion's other poet.

Certainly, the poetry can blaze; as when Blake writes of the lark,

> Mounting upon the wings of light into the Great Expanse:
> Reechoing against the lovely blue & shining heavenly Shell:
> His little throat labours with inspiration; every feather
> On throat & breast & wings vibrates with the effluence Divine . . .
> The Honeysuckle sleeping on the Oak: the flaunting beauty
> Revels along upon the wind; the White-thorn lovely May
> Opens her many lovely eyes . . .
>
> (Plate 31, lines 32–5, 53-6, E, pp. 130–1)

Despite such magnificent writing, however, the meaning of *Milton* is muffled, in comparison with *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. This is partly, I suspect, because the later work is involved with that side of Gnostic thought from which this book has consistently pulled away, the pleromatic world beyond the scope of human experience. We are conducted into strange regions. We are shown Eternity, a place of 'great Wars', 'fury of Poetic Inspiration . . . Mental forms creating . . .' (Plate 30, lines 19–20, E, p. 129) and we are shown Beulah, an intermediate realm of mild restfulness (Plate 30, line 14, E, p.129). Similarly, in *The Book of Urizen*, the solipsistic creation of Urizen is preceded by 'The Eternals'.[132] All of this seems doubly removed from the strenuous moral life into which Adam and Eve direct their faltering steps at the end of *Paradise Lost*, though it is interesting to see that Blake's pleromatic world is a place of energy, not stasis. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is more accessibly engaged with the moral life as we all experience it:

> Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.
>
> And being restrained it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire.
>
> The history of this is written in Paradise Lost. & the Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah.
>
> And the original Archangel or possessor of the command of the heavenly host, is calld the Devil or Satan and his children are call'd Sin & Death
>
> But in the Book of Job Milton's Messiah is call'd Satan.
>
> For this history has been adopted by both parties.
>
> It indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out. but the Devils account is, that the Messiah fell. & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss
>
> This is shewn in the Gospel, where he prays to the Father to send the comforter or Desire that Reason may have Ideas to build on, the Jehovah of the Bible being no other than he, who dwells in flaming fire. Know that after Christ's death, he became Jehovah.
>
> But in Milton; the Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio of the five senses & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum! (*MHH*, Plate 5, E, pp. 34–5)

[132] See Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, pp. 173–4.

The main thrust of Blake's thought is clear. Reason is seen as a mechanism of restraint and restraint is fundamentally evil, even as energy is fundamentally good: 'Energy is Eternal Delight' (*MHH*, Plate 4, E, p. 34); It is an error to suppose that 'God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies' (ibid.). The pious, the makers of sacred codes, have made a huge mistake, that of thinking that God is 'the passive that obeys reason' and that Evil is 'the active springing from Energy' (*MHH*, Plate 3, E, p. 34). Milton has fallen into this error because his God is rational and his Devil a figure of lawless passion. Brilliantly, Blake observes that if one goes back to the Book of Job this system of values and nomenclature is reversed. Blake hated rationalist theologians of the eighteenth century who liked to point out that God could be inferred from the reasonable and useful aspects of the creation; he gives the day for work, the night for rest, rain to water the plants and sun to ripen them, in majestic and regular succession. In Job, however, God is the source of all that is frighteningly, magnificently unintelligible; he sends rain 'on the wilderness wherein there is no man' (38: 26); the voice of God in Job is scornful of rational explanation or conciliation: 'Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? . . . Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?' (39: 19; 38: 4). David Hume in his *Natural History of Religion* (written before 1757 but not published until 1777) noticed that in ancient Europe God was often located in the irregular rather than in the regular aspects of nature; he quotes Euripides' *Hecuba*, 958–60, 'The gods toss all into confusion, mix everything with its reverse, that all of us pay them the more worship and reverence'.[133]

The Devil, whom Blake would have us respect, has a different story to tell, quite unlike that accepted by the Church. It was the Messiah who fell—presumably from the original Heaven of Energy—and formed an *ersatz* heaven of stolen scraps, rational, sensory fragments; Christ praying for comfort (is Blake thinking of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane?) is

[133] Ed. A. Wayne Colver, bound in one volume with *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. John Valdimir Price (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 28, 33.

perhaps to be linked with the questioning figure of Job: in the Book of Job the 'comforters' are rationalists, correctly despised in the narrative; Christ turning to the wicked Father, asking for such comfort as he can provide, is in return subjected to the rule of evil rationality (for Jehovah is the truly hellish figure). It is puzzling to see Christ (usually exalted by Blake) attacked, but it is consistent with Blake's general position that he is here blamed for a moment of weak deference to the cruel Father.

In *Paradise Lost*, we gather, the degradation or mere reduction of divinity is even further advanced: 'The Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio of the five senses & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum!' This is witty, but a little cheap. To call Milton's anti–Calvinist, Arminian God 'Destiny' is a very bad shot indeed and, if we remember the great invocations of the Holy Spirit in *Paradise Lost*, to say his 'Holy-ghost' is a vacuum is merely silly. Christ as a manifestation of empirical reductionism looks like a wild irruption of Blake's anti-scientific prejudice. But the intuition that there is a mental war which must be fought between the ethic of energy and the ethic of restraint is utterly fundamental and strong.

The form of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* proclaims it an intellectual squib and therefore, in part at least, a joke. This chosen mode creates a suspended field in which violent, antithetical ideas can develop, by an inner principle, to extremes from which even Blake might have flinched, in another context. At the same time, however, he is an excitable writer, easily carried away by the thrill of turning accepted morality upside down. The opening salvo, 'Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained', is very clever. Watching Blake in action is like watching a cunning wrestler, using his opponent's strength to defeat him; Blake seems for a moment to give way, to allow that the moralists successfully restrain the passions, but then reconstrues their success as a mere consequence of feebleness. 'Weak' in Blake's sentence carries a charge of primitive scorn; we are carried by it into an older ethic; the moralist is drawn into a defensive position, from which he stammeringly protests that he is not deficient in virility.

The degree of Blake's philosophical radicalism is in fact variable, so that it is not difficult, if one trails and charts the

presuppositions behind his fiery tropes, to catch him out in contradiction. The attack on God the Father as vengeful is something many readers find they can respond to with warm assent (once the shock of seeing *God* described in this way has faded) because the idea that cruelty is wicked is utterly familiar. Where someone like Richard Hooker would be interested in drawing a distinction between cruel and just punishment, it is in Blake's rhetorical interest to run the two notions together, stressing instead the gulf between judicial punishment and loving forgiveness. Here, as we have seen, he can draw on a potential division, in Holy Scripture itself, between the role of the Father and that of the Son, a division which historical Christianity has muffled. Blake, like other Antinomians before him, chose instead to sharpen it. This is fair, shrewd criticism effectively directed at mealy-mouthed unifying theologians. Antinomians sometimes speak as if they have thrown out morality itself, but as long at they believe in love as against 'the Law', they are holding to a clear moral value, with its own imperatives. Blake famously scorned the morality of 'Thou shalt not', but even the ethic of love can be set out in the form of an interdictory law, in the manner of the Decalogue: 'Thou shalt not hate'. But when Blake makes energy prior to *every* other virtue, so that violent destruction, say, is preferable to restrained affection, the basis of the case against the tyrant God is actually undermined; he can easily look like a 'tiger of wrath'. 'The Father is bad because he is cruel' is theologically revolutionary but ethically it is entirely conventional; 'Cruel energy is better than controlled benevolence' is *ethically* revolutionary, and the ethical revolution can subvert the earlier theological subversion. The cardinal difficulty in Blake's picture of Milton—and it is a difficulty to which we shall return—arises from his hostility to reason. It is as if Blake conceded too much to the (yet unborn) C. S. Lewis when he wrote the words 'without knowing it' after 'Milton . . . was a true Poet and of the Devils party'. Lewis himself could allow, as relatively unimportant, the possibility that many elements in Milton's unconscious mind might indeed respond to the allure of Satan, so long as we in our turn grant that his intelligence was on the side of orthodoxy. I have tried to show, however, that in fact the *argument* of *Paradise Lost* leads us to a dynamic, positive

conception of the Fall induced by Satan; this means precisely that Milton's intelligence, not some unconscious, poetical anti-self, led him at last to back the dynamic principle, to exalt it above the static. Blake, far from overstating the subversive element in *Paradise Lost*, actually exaggerates the orthodoxy of Milton. Crabb Robinson records that Blake 'wished me to expose the falsehood of his doctrine, taught in the Paradise Lost—That Sexual intercourse arous [*sic*] out of the Fall'.[134] While it is true that Milton's Adam is seized by a guilty concupiscence after the Fall (ix. 1013) we have already seen how daring Milton was, in fact, in his resistance to the dominant Patristic tradition that Adam and Eve never knew the joys of love-making until they fell. When Milton, in the full light of audacious *reason*, affirms the reality of unfallen sexuality, Blake is mysteriously unable to see that he has done so. That is because for Milton *gnosis* (knowledge, intelligence) is itself a fiery thing, pursuing an elusive quarry. While Blake's reflections on Milton are evidently Gnostic in their hostility to God the Father, they are anti-Gnostic on the central, etymological point of knowledge itself. But of course at the deepest level Blake is no more anti-knowledge than he is anti-moral.

(iv) Antinomian Blake

Blake oscillates between the words 'imagination' and 'vision', as terms commanding his fundamental allegiance. This of itself suggests that he, like other Romantics, wished to reinterpret imagination as an organ of knowledge rather than a trivially fictive faculty. If imagination, reinterpreted in this way, is deemed to have been raised in status, the presupposition is clear: knowledge must be a good thing. But Blake's obstinate hostility to reason remains. This separates him from Milton. Blake hated science, an attitude in certain respects entirely consonant with primary Gnosticism, which despised any involvement with the physical universe made by the wicked Demiurge. For Milton, Galileo was a glamorous figure, appealing at once to his rebellious imagination and to his intelligence.

134 *The Blake Records*, ed. Bentley, p. 544.

In so far, however, as Gnosticism had shifted, to accommodate an admiration of magicians and scientists as heroes of *gnosis*, Blake can seem awkwardly anti-Gnostic. We need to proceed with care.

To begin with it is easy to see how a theology which exalts Grace above the Law can generate a contempt for rule-governed rationality. Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* makes vivid the contrast between Calvinists who condemned the human intellect and Hermetists who exalted it. It is the Hermetist in Milton, not the Protestant, that is excited by the example of Galileo (though it is of course convenient for his Protestantism that Galileo was condemned by the Roman Catholic Inquisition). We must also remember that Milton differed from Calvin on the freedom of the human will, this being linked, in the mind of the English poet, with freedom of *intellection*. If the essence of salvation and the spiritual life is located in a wholly inexplicable, unmerited gift from an invisible God, reason becomes as dispensable as good works. Certainly some seventeenth-century sectaries declared their opposition to learning and education. E. P. Thompson writes, of his favourite sect, 'No theme recurs more often in the Muggletonian songs than hostility to Reason, "the right devil". The faithful prided themselves on their rejection of the reason of the enlightened. They pitted their faith against "the serpent reasonings" of polite learning.'[135] In 1825 Blake told Crabb Robinson, 'There is no use in education. I hold it wrong. It is the great sin. It is eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.'[136] The last words may seem to overthrow at a stroke the entire Ophite–Gnostic, naturalist Fortunate Fall which I laboured to establish in the last chapter. But we shall discover as this book goes on that Blake, for the sake of immediate rhetorical impact, is entirely willing to avail himself of traditional applications of forms like 'sin' and 'Satanic'; only a little skill is needed, usually, to see where these terms are being applied to things which Blake finds truly detestable and where they are being recuperated—turned inside out—for a revolutionary morality. Granted, Blake found it easier to applaud the pure rebellion of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, springing from the poetic unconscious, than to admire the conceivably more rad-

135 *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 86.
136 *The Blake Records*, ed. Bentley, p. 540.

ical intellectual argument implicitly advanced in the poem, but, after all, the admired rebellion led precisely to the eating from the tree. It is hard indeed to separate them. When Blake said what he said to Crabb Robinson it is likely that he simply wished to express, as forcibly as he could, a prior conviction that education is a vile thing.

The ancient Ophite Gnostics, if Augustine was right, revered the serpent because, in Genesis, it led to knowledge. If Blake supports rebellion against Jehovah, snakes ought to be good in his writings, as the serpent was good for the Ophites. But Blake's view of intellection is in fact ambiguous, and his attitude to the serpent uncertain. E. P. Thompson has found in Blake a number of 'bad' serpents, of which the most striking is the picture (pen and watercolour, *c.* 1805) 'Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent.[137] Here it seems hard to avoid the inference that the serpent symbolizes the hated moral law of the Jews. The wicked characters in Blake's pictures, Thompson rightly observes, frequently have scales, as snakes do. But Thompson acknowledges that Blake is unsure and confused. His picture *Eve Tempted by the Serpent*, in *Nine Illustrations to Paradise Lost*, shows a gorgeous snake, who seems to be made of light, rising in a great curve around Eve, who stands in happy nakedness, while Adam lies sleeping in the background (see Plate 4). In *The Temptation and Fall of Eve* the serpent is pressing the apple into Eve's mouth, using its own mouth to do so, in a powerfully sexual manner, as David Bindman has noticed.[138] In the Notebook poem 'To Nobodaddy' ('Nobodaddy' is the jealous Father–God, a harshly humorous way of referring to Urizen) Blake wrote,

> Why art thou silent & invisible
> Father of Jealousy
> Why dost thou hide thyself in clouds
> From every searching Eye
>
> Why darkness & obscurity
> In all thy words & laws
> That none dare eat the fruit but from
> The wily serpents jaws.
>
> (E, p. 471)

137 Reproduced as Plate 5 in *Witness Against the Beast*.
138 *Blake as Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), p. 119.

Here the Father's transcendence is attacked (together with his jealousy) but the serpent is no Ophitic Christ. Rather, he seems to be a base means of knowledge, forced upon human kind by the Oppressor. This is closely parallel to the Apocryphon of John in which the Saviour explains that, while he leads indeed to knowledge, the serpent is closely identified with the will of the tyrant-god Ialdabaoth, and seeks to sow corruption in their minds.[139] E. P. Thompson thinks that the serpent in Blake's picture is obviously phallic but this, in the value-system of Blake, could as easily be a plus as a minus. While E. P. Thompson finds 'bad' snakes, John Beer finds 'good' ones. He has argued that the serpent in Blake symbolizes energy and selfhood.[140] Beer cites the fact (which we noted earlier) that in J. Bryant's *Analysis of Ancient Mythology* there are plates devoted to the Ophites.[141] Bryant, it will be remembered, was one of our possible 'channels of transmission', whereby Blake might have become aware of Gnostic ideas. He adds that, in the symbolism of Stonehenge, according to the conjectures of W. Stukeley, the Trinity was represented and, in particular, that a serpentine form represented the Son. Beer suggests that Blake equated the Son with 'Visionary Man' or energy[142]. Now we are, once more, on the brink of the Ophite version.

In *America*, *Europe*, and *Vala*, or *The Four Zoas,* Orc, who with his fiery energy resists the icy tyranny of Urizen–Jehovah, is clearly identified with the serpent of *Genesis*: 'I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree . . .' (*America*, Plate 8, line 1, E, p. 54); 'Orc began to Organize a Serpent body . . .' (*The Four Zoas*, vii. 153, E, p. 356). In *The Four Zoas* Urizen broods on the unsubdued opposition of Orc:

> For Urizen fixd in Envy sat brooding & coverd with snow
> His book of iron on his knees he tracd the dreadful letters
> While his snows fell & his storms beat to cool the flames of Orc
>
> (viiA. 28–30, E, p. 353)

[139] Section 22, in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 45–6. See above, pp. 218.

[140] *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), *passim*, and *Blake Newsletter*, 4/4 (Spring 1971), p. 145.

[141] *Blake's Visionary Universe*, p. 23. Relevant plates are reproduced ibid., pp. 24–5.

[142] Ibid., pp. 20–1; cf. p. 286.

But is Orc Christ? Certainly the figure of Orc can often seem more hellish than heavenly; he dwells, we have just been told, in 'a Cavernd Universe of flaming fire' (vii. 6, E, p. 352). But his obstinate and continued resistance to the envious tyranny of Urizen makes him ulimately good in Blake's moral scheme. For all his strength Orc is unable to blow the iron trumpet of the Last Judgement, but Newton, the prince of rationalists whom Blake detested, can (*Europe*, Plate 13, lines 1–5, E, p. 65). It is possible that the description of Albion's Angel, 'outstretchd on wings of wrath' in *America* (Plate 13, line 11, E, p. 56) is partly founded on Milton's account of the Messiah, executing the punitive will of the Father at *Paradise Lost*, vi. 834–9. Since Albion's Angel is here ranged against Orc some will conclude that Orc is as much the enemy of Jesus as he is of the Father. But no good reader of Blake can think so for long. Because Milton's good Father has been turned into the wicked Urizen, his emissary cannot be that Jesus whom Blake loved. Instead Blake turns the Miltonic Messiah into an angel of death, very like the exterminating angel sent to destroy Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 21: 15) or those angels who were employed to smite the men of Sodom (Genesis 19: 11) or to send plagues upon Egypt (Psalms 78: 49). Of course Milton's Messiah and the angels of destruction are all, for the orthodox, fulfilling the will of God, but, for all that, it is just a little easier for the ordinary reader to turn against one whose only function is to be a minister of death than against the redeemer of mankind, and Blake knows this. In truth Orc is closer to Christ than Albion's Angel is. Anyone who has been reading the writings of the Ranters knows this as soon as he hears Orc accuse Urizen of perverting 'the fiery joy' to 'ten commands', in order to bring in 'that stony law' (*America*, Plate 8, lines 3 and 5, E, p. 54).

Perhaps the most difficult of all the Blakean serpents is the one we meet in 'I saw a chapel all of gold', from the Notebook (*c.* 1791–2):

> I saw a chapel all of gold
> That none did dare to enter in
> And many weeping stood without
> Weeping mourning worshipping
>
> I saw a serpent rise between
> The white pillars of the door

And he forcd & forcd & forcd
Down the golden hinges tore

And along the pavement sweet
Set with pearls & rubies bright
All his slimy length he drew
Till upon the altar white

Vomiting his poison out
On the bread & on the wine
So I turnd into a sty
And laid me down among the swine

(E, pp. 467–8)

W. H. Stevenson says in his note on this poem that the chapel is the chapel of innocent love and that the serpent is sexuality perverted by repression so that the sight of it revolts the poet. But while the reader may be revolted by the serpent vomiting in the jewelled chapel, the poet within the poem evidently is not revolted. His reaction is to choose dirt, to lie down with the swine. As W. B. Yeats long afterwards preferred 'the foul rag and bone shop of the heart',[143] as Laurence Clarkson would rather lie down with the gypsies than sit in his pew in church, so Blake prefers the sty to the gold, rubies, and white pillars of the chapel. If Stevenson is right, this chapel, the chapel of innocent love, must be set in deliberate contrast with the chapel in the poem which appears in the notebook immediately before this one.

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

(E, p. 26)

143 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 392.

This poem is clear. We see in it at once the Antinomian hard opposition of (negative) Mosaic Law to love and freedom. Notice that the evil chapel does not replace an earlier temple of innocence; rather, as in pastoral, innocence is associated with the green world and hewn stone is already evidence of corruption.

In 'I saw a chapel all of gold' the vision has shifted, I grant, but not to the point of completely reversing the preceding poem. The chapel has become more opulent but it is, I believe, a critical error—a bad misreading—to infer goodness of any sort, still less innocence, from gold, marble, and rubies. The accumulated wisdom of pastoral says 'No' to any such inference. In *Vala, or The Four Zoas* Orc accuses Urizen of ornamenting the forbidden tree 'with gold & rubies' (vii. 137, E, p. 356). As soon as we are told of the sad, weeping worshippers who are afraid to enter the chapel, we know that it is a wicked place. The popish/Anglican bread and wine inside this intimidating building again imply that the intrusive, destructive serpent is good.

Leopold Damrosch Jr. in his *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*[144] observes that Gnostic inversion of good and evil is characteristic of Blake's earlier work, especially *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. One might point out that such inversion is equally prominent in the late conversations with Crabb Robinson. Damrosch himself goes on to say that Blake's Urizen became more like the Gnostic Demiurge as the influence of Boehme on Blake waned.[145] On 'I saw a chapel', he writes,

> This tempting yet vicious holy of holies seems to invite a phallic assault, and it is interesting to note that such indeed was the conclusion of the ancient Ophitic ('serpent-worshipping') heretics. As a scandalised Epiphanius described their ritual, loaves of bread were placed on an altar, a serpent was put on them, and each of the faithful ate of the loaves after kissing the serpent on the mouth. To the Ophites the serpent symbolized the forbidden knowledge of the Garden of Eden and more specifically sexual initiation. To Blake, however, it connotes sexual depredation; ejaculation is imagined horribly as the serpent vomiting his poison . . .[146]

[144] pp. 82–3. [145] Ibid., p. 179.

[146] Ibid., p. 205. Damrosch is here drawing on Jacques Lacarrière, *Les Gnostiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 99–100, trans. Nina Rootes as *The Gnostics* (London: Peter Owen, 1977), pp. 88–9.

Damrosch sees very clearly those Antinomian and Gnostic elements in the poem which promise a God-destroying, tyrannicidal serpent, but is brought up short, as any good reader will be, by the sheer nastiness of the vomited poison.

Is it conceivable that Blake, who after all does choose at the end to lie down in the filth, may actually have welcomed the serpent's vomit? Damrosch has taken us back to the libertine Gnostics as Epiphanius describes them. If we read Epiphanius on the Borborites (that is 'the Filth-ites') the proposition may seem no longer to be self-evidently absurd. In the Eucharistic service of bread and wine, he tells us, the worshippers have sexual intercourse:

> The woman and the man take the male emission in their own hands and stand gazing toward heaven with the impurity in their hands; and . . . they pray . . . 'We offer unto thee this gift, the body of Christ . . .'
>
> And likewise with the woman's emission: when it happens that she has her period, her menstrual blood is gathered and they mutually take it in their hands and eat it. And they say, 'This is the blood of Christ . . .'[147]

Blake in inverting the moral law, was certainly capable of going a long way down this road. A lesser Antinomian, so to speak, would be content with the abuse of those virtues which we are all, already, half-prepared to regard as dangerous, to urge for example that penal judgement is founded on hatred and is therefore wicked. A really revolutionary ethical subversive, on the other hand, must shock. The distinction between the two sorts of subversion, the mitigated and the truly radical, can be traced in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. There Nietzsche attacks Christianity in two ways: first he says that, although Christians are always talking about love, really they are motivated by hatred and resentment; secondly he says that pity and love are not really virtues at all, but a late perversion of value, a rationalization of weakness (the names of virtues, in the beginning, were all forms of self-description by the strong). The first of these is not radically revolutionary in moral terms. It presupposes only what we all in any case believe, that hate is a bad thing. That is why highly moral Christians can read these

147 Epiphanius, xxvi. 4, in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 206–7.

passages in Nietzsche in a penitential spirit of grateful assent. But the second attack shocks; it tells us that something we really thought good, at the most fundamental level, is contemptible. When Nietzsche says that in the old, splendid society no festive occasion was complete until some easily oppressed person had been cruelly teased and bullied,[148] the moral reader feels immediate acute discomfort. This is what real ethical transgressiveness tastes like. We have reached a point of profound resemblance between Blake and Nietzsche. For Blake, as we have seen, was undoubtedly willing to say that cruel energy was morally better than controlled benevolence (with the alarming consequence of re-enthroning Jehovah, who actually scores quite high—higher than Christ—on cruel energy). Blake's notorious, 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires' (*MHH*, Plate 10, E, p. 38) is a remark of this radical kind. It is upsetting and, entirely predictably, commentators have laboured to exorcise the offending words. In Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* the trendily anarchic principal male character, Howard Kirk, quotes these words as part of a generalized assault on the sexual virtue of one Miss Callender, supposing them to mean that inhibition is inherently wrong. Miss Callender, who is presented in the book as sane and scholarly, patiently explains to Kirk that because English is not his subject he has failed to notice the presence of metaphorical language. The 'infant in its cradle' is not a real infant whose murder Blake is cheerfully recommending; it is a personification of the unacted desire at its first, frail appearance; Blake is saying, 'Do not foster and cherish desires which you cannot bring to fruition; crush them at the outset'.[149]

Miss Callender has recuperated Blake for conventional morality. But Kirk got Blake right and Miss Callender got him wrong. Blake indeed sees the inhibition of desire as inherently worse than any positive desire and he knows, with intellectual honesty, that some positive desires may be violent.

As long as this thought is expressed in terms of magnificent, vigorous animals—'The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of

[148] In *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 198.

[149] *The History Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 109 and 143.

God', 'The lust of the goat is the bounty of God', 'The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves . . . are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man', 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction' (*MHH*, Plates 8 and 9, E, p. 36)—we may rejoice and applaud. All these animals, with the possible exception of the goat, are beautiful and reasonably remote from us. But if Blake really means that ferocity is preferable to inhibition, he is turning fundamental morality upside down and is obliged to write invidiously, to say the hated thing. The Brethren of the Free Spirit in the fourteenth century held that 'it would be better that the whole world should be destroyed and perish utterly' than that a 'free man should refrain from any act to which his nature moves him'.[150] The real implications of this are quite as horrifying as Blake's proposition, but the impact is muffled by the generalized form in which it is stated. Blake's imagined infant merely brings home what is inescapably entailed in such doctrines.

Incidentally, the other way of exorcising Blake's words—by saying that they are offered as 'Proverbs of Hell' and are therefore implicitly condemned by the writer before they are uttered—will persuade no one who knows anything about the early inversive Blake. In a world in which the God the vicar talks about is bad, the Devil might easily be good. If anything, the phrase 'Proverb of Hell' will imply covert commendation. Consider 'The Clod and the Pebble', from *Songs of Experience*:

> Love seeketh not Itself to please,
> Nor for itself hath any care;
> But for another gives it ease,
> And builds a Heaven in Hells despair
>
> So sang a little Clod of Clay,
> Trodden with the cattles feet:
> But a Pebble of the brook,
> Warbled out these metres meet.
>
> Love seeketh only Self to please,
> To bind another to its delight:
> Joys in anothers loss of ease,
> And builds a Hell in Heavens despite
>
> (E, p. 19)

[150] See Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 178.

In this poem there are two kinds of love, self-denying and self-pleasing. It is not until we meet the word 'delight', a word of overmastering power in Blake, that we are aware at last that the pious self-denial of the first stanza is condemned. Nor is this condemnation in the slightest degree reversed by the building of hell in the last line. No doubt the words are offered to the reader with deliberate effrontery, perhaps even with a full consciousness that they will be misinterpreted by most, but, by the inversive logic we find repeatedly in Blake, we have no difficulty in concluding that, as Satan is preferred to Jehovah, so Satan's hell will be preferred to Jehovah's heaven. We must not suppose that the final victory of selfish love is an easy one. Blake is not interested in opposing obvious wrongs to equally obvious rights; rather he wishes to counter (developed) right with (elemental) right. That Blake could respond morally to self-abnegation is abundantly clear: 'The most sublime act is to set another before you' (*MHH*, Plate 7, E, p. 36) . In *The Book of Thel* we have the beautiful words of the shining Cloud, 'Everything that lives, | Lives not alone, nor for itself' (Plate 3, E, p. 5). The words of the Cloud are reinforced by those of the Clod of Clay (who must be the same as the one we meet in 'The Clod and the Pebble'): 'We live not for our selves'. The anxious virgin, Thel, is in this short work advised in turn by a lily, a cloud, a worm, and a lump of clay. They all tell her that life given in the service of others is fulfilment. This, it may be thought, is enough to settle our reading of 'The Clod and the Pebble' for ever, in favour of the Clod, against the Pebble. But *Thel* is an unfinished poem and one can in fact be sure of nothing. The virgin, despite her hesitant and seemingly receptive disposition, is not clearly persuaded by the advice she is given. Her own 'motto', prefixed to the poem, is eloquent of the values of the splendid predator, scornful of the lowly or confined:

> Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?
> Or wilt thou go ask the Mole:
> Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
> Or Love in a golden bowl?
>
> (E, p. 3)

The wisdom of the silvery Cloud is not perhaps immune, therefore, from an implicit criticism, even here. There is a touch of

religious complacency—of the vacuously regal—about the Cloud, even before he speaks. We are told how he 'reclind upon his airy throne' (Plate 2, E, p. 5). Blake did not like thrones and those who sit on them. Immediately before the lines about living for others the Cloud rebukes Thel for her distress at the thought that she is subject to death and decay:

> Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies,
> How great thy use, how great thy blessing . . .
>
> (E, p. 5)

It is not difficult to catch, in the second of these lines, the accents of the sanctimonious preacher ('And the Angel told Tom *if he'd be a good boy* . . .'). Thel for her part confesses that she is not like the little Cloud:

> I hear the warbling birds,
> But I feed not the warbling birds. they fly and seek their food.
>
> (Plate 2, E, p.5)

The birds are seen, wistfully, as creatures simultaneously selfish and joyously innocent. Their freedom places them beyond the reach of charity. They feed themselves. The word 'warbling' links the birds of *Thel* to the Pebble. For, while the self-abnegating Clod is trodden by the cattle, the self-fulfilling Pebble is an unfettered poet, *warbling* 'metres meet' (remember that, in the famous sentence from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Milton's poetic gift was 'in fetters' when he turned from the Devil to angels and God).

Given that Blake is intermittently involved in real, radical ethical subversion an occasional hatefulness, for the ordinary reader, in the figures he commends is not so much a local embarrassment or unclarity as entirely predictable. If, in 'I saw a chapel all of gold', Blake really detests the chapel and is really wallowing, with Borboritic zeal, in the filth and mire of things, why should not the vomit of the serpent be intended by him as glorious?

I do not know whether I have persuaded my reader. I certainly have not persuaded myself. Logically, the case I have made is strong. Rhetorically it is weak. The truth is that the fiercest subverter of morality—a Nietzsche or a Blake—knows that if he is to fire the reader with similar revolutionary zeal he

must appeal to an *existing* (that is wholly conventional) set of responses as part of the conciliatory or evangelical side of the operation. Both Blake and Nietzsche in fact do this again and again by invoking traditional *aesthetic* responses and then converting them into new-moral responses, under cover of a generalized hortatory excitement. Nietzsche knows that his reader will consider the lion a magnificent animal, aesthetically, and also knows that, with a little skill, that same reader can be brought to say, 'Yes, lions are much better than lambs', after which the word 'better' can be invested with full ethical force. A few pages earlier in this chapter I mildly discounted Blake's allusions to lions and tigers, but of course they are essential to the evangelical rhetoric of his design upon us. The trouble with the serpent's vomit is that it is neither sexy nor aesthetically magnificent. Moreover the word 'poison' ('Vomiting his poison out') is anti-life, counter to the primary impulse of the new ethic in which energy, delight and *life* are terms of positive power. The serpent of the Ophites seems to be slipping from us. This is, at least in part, a 'bad serpent' after all, perhaps in some mysterious way representative of that repressive spirit of distortion to which the chapel itself is a memorial. The snake may represent sex, but it is sex as affected by the Mosaic Law, a ghastly distortion. The poem remains far harder to interpret than 'The Clod and the Pebble'. Some will be tempted to resolve the *aporia* with a very English compromise: the poet is deliberately drawing a distinction, say, between the natural, acceptable dirt of the pig-sty and the unnatural filth of the chapel. I prefer to say that the poem is clouded by a real hesitation, perhaps arising from the doubleness of Blake's attitude to intellection: liberating vision or Urizenic reason.

I have compared Blake with the Borborites. But equally relevant is the Ialdabaoth (Jehovah) of the Apocryphon of John, who has a serpentine body with a lion's face.[151] Thus, in the writings of the early Gnostics also, not all serpents are good. Yet Blake's snake irrupts into the chapel and despoils it. This snake cannot be an agent of the chapel's Lord. I am tempted to say that this poem is not 'fruitfully ambiguous' but simply confused. Perhaps Blake permitted a kind of horror at the

[151] Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 35.

implications of his own Antinomianism to enter the poem. The brazen, unmoved countenance of 'Sooner murder an infant' is not sustained in this poem; instead 'conventional repulsion' is suddenly allowed to show itself as real horror. There may be a deeper honesty in this very willingness to betray a failure of revolutionary nerve. Otherwise—and I think with greater probability—we must suppose that Blake has chosen an eerie meta-ethical neutrality: 'Make of this what you will'.

Let us now move sideways and look at an analogous Romantic: Shelley. Like Blake, Shelley attacked established religion and thought the Devil in *Paradise Lost* far superior to God the Father.[152] It may be objected that Shelley was an avowed atheist in his youth, heavily influenced by Hume and eighteenth-century rationalism,[153] while Blake was always religious and hated rationalism. But that crucial separation of the Son from the Father with which this book has been concerned is certainly traceable in Shelley. In his *Prometheus Unbound* Jupiter is the 'Oppressor of mankind' and Prometheus the 'Champion'.[154] A Gnostic hostility to Jehovah, the Demiurge, is clear. Moreover, Christ is not immediately included in the condemnation of Deity. Prometheus was nailed to the rock and Christ was nailed to the cross. In Act I the Chorus say (or sing),

> One came forth of gentle worth
> Smiling on the sanguine earth;
> His words outlived him, like swift poison
> Withering up truth, peace, and pity
>
> (546–9)

The description of Christ's surviving teaching as 'poison' certainly looks like hostility, but it is likely that Shelley is thinking of a process of petrifaction overtaking the message as it turned into Church doctrine. Christ himself is viewed with

[152] See his essay 'On the Devil and Devils', in *Works*, ed. Forman, vol. vi (*Prose*, vol. ii), p. 288.

[153] Shelley's *The Refutation of Deism* (1814), for example, is clearly indebted to Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, especially in the structure of its attack on teleology. See A. M. Hughes, *The Nascent Mind of Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), pp. 243–4.

[154] Shelley's Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1905; repr. 1952), p. 208.

loving pity and is seen as himself grief-stricken at the transformation of his teaching:

> 'Tis his mild and gentle ghost
> Wailing for the faith he kindled
> . . . . . .
> And the future is dark, and the present is spread
> Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head.
>
> Semichorus I
>
> Drops of bloody agony flow
> From his white and quivering brow . . .
>
> (Act I, 554–5, 562–5)

The last lines may be applied with equal ease to Christ or to Prometheus, the antagonist of Jupiter. Later in the drama Prometheus recoils in horror from a vision of the tortured Christ:

> Let that thorn-wounded brow
> Stream not with blood.
>
> (Act I, 599)

The Fury in reply uses the words Christ used, 'They know not what they do' (631).

Neville Rogers says that Shelley was clear in his attitude to the Creator but could never quite make up his mind about Christ.[155] In the fiercely atheistical notes to *Queen Mab* Shelley condemned that Christ who claimed to be the Son of God and hypocritically pretended to offer compassion and peace, but praised another possible Christ—Christ the human being, who desired reform and died a hero's death in the cause of liberty.[156] Moreover, he expressly restricts his atheism to the Creator; his note on vii. 13, 'There is no God', begins, 'This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity'.[157] In a later addition to the Notes, however, Shelley decides that Christ may have been ambitious for the throne of Judaea.[158] But in the manuscript fragment 'On the Doctrine of Christ' Shelley notes

[155] *Shelley at Work: A Critical Inquiry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 71.
[156] *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson, p. 820.
[157] Ibid., p. 812.
[158] *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 1989–), vol. i, p. 397. Vol. ii has not yet been published.

with approval that the teachings of Jesus 'have scarcely the smallest resemblance to the Jewish law',[159] and in his essay 'On Christianity' (1817) he explicitly opposes Christ's teaching to 'the law of retaliation'and affirms that finally Christ proceeded 'to abrogate the system of the Jewish law'.[160] One senses that Shelley is here very close indeed to a Ranterish outright opposition of Christ's doctrine of love to the Decalogue of Moses, but is insulated by his social class—higher than Blake's—from contact with the living Antinomian tradition.

We have seen how the protagonist of *Prometheus Unbound* can easily merge, as a martyr of liberty, with Christ. Shelley, meanwhile, in his Preface to the drama, likens him to Satan, 'the Hero' of *Paradise Lost*.[161] Once more the groundwork of the ancient subversion of the Trinity seems to be in place: the Ophite identification of the serpent in Genesis with Christ. Shelley does not begin, as Blake does, from a religious hostility to reason; rather, as we saw, he regards the rationalists of the eighteenth century as his natural allies. It ought then to be easier for Shelley than it was for Blake to revere the serpent of *gnosis*. Neville Rogers, like John Beer, is eager to argue for good serpents in Shelley and makes a connection with the *drakon ouroboros*, the 'tail-eating snake' of Hermes Trismegistus.[162] When the tyrant Jupiter describes his own collapse he likens the force which brings him down and would exalt Prometheus over him—Demogorgon—to a serpent. The effect, however, is faint and fugitive:

> We two will sink on the wide waves of ruin,
> Even as a vulture and a snake outspent
> Drop, twisted in inextricable fight,
> Into a shoreless sea.
>
> (III. i. 71–4)

There is reason to think that Shelley wrote these lines with Milton at the back of his mind. The monosyllable, 'drop', placed as it is at the beginning of the line, takes us back to the fall of Mulciber, a type of Lucifer, in the first book of Milton's epic:

[159] *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E. B. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993–), vol. i, p. 272. Vol. ii has not yet been published.
[160] Ibid., p. 262.
[161] *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson, p. 205.
[162] *Shelley at Work*, p. 69.

> Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell
> From heaven, they fabled, thrown by angry Jove
> Sheer o'er the crystal battlements; from morn
> To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
> A summer's day; and with the setting sun
> Dropped from the zenith like a falling star,
> On Lemnos, the Aegean isle
>
> (i. 740–6)

The effect of the metrical placing of 'dropped' is stunning; the long preceding sentence, the successive graduations of the descent, followed by 'and with the setting sun' taking us to the end of the line, irresistibly create the expectation of a conclusive word, 'landed' or 'alighted' at the beginning of line 745, instead of which we get 'dropped'—and so we fall again, plummeting endlessly it seems, until we are granted the quiescence of 'On Lemnos, the Aegean isle'. Any poet with an ear will seize on the importance of 'dropped' and store it in his memory. Shelley's 'drop' is, in its context, weaker than Milton's 'dropped' but it remains a muted, highly specific Miltonism.

James Rieger points out that in Shelley's abortive romance, *The Assassins*, we are shown a 'quasi-crucified Stranger', a 'proto-Prometheus' who has fallen from heaven. When Albedir conducts this person to his paradisal dwelling they come upon a girl who is singing to a snake, cherishing it in her bosom.[163] Rieger goes on to observe that 'the Assassins are evidently a sect of snake-worshippers . . . We are told specifically that many of the Assassins' beliefs "considerably resembled those of the sect afterwards known by the name of Gnostics. They esteemed the human understanding to be the paramount rule of human conduct." '[164] The words Rieger quotes are Shelley's own.[165] Obviously Shelley has picked up from somewhere an account of Ophite Gnosticism and, characteristically, has emphasized human as against divine *gnosis*.

What is strangely absent from *Prometheus Unbound* is the

[163] *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: George Braziller, 1967), p. 132.

[164] Ibid.

[165] See *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (London: Ernest Benn; New York: Charles Scribner, 1926–9), vol. vi, p. 155.

element of subversive sexuality. Rieger has to curb his excitement at the multiplying resemblances between Shelley's thought and that of the Gnostics when he comes to the question of an analogy between Shelley's Asia and the 'lustful Wisdom' of the Gnostics:

> The temptation to equate Asia with Sophia Prunikos should be resisted. Wisdom the whore enters modern literary tradition through a Tyrian prostitute with whom the 'auspicious' (*faustus*) Simon Magus travelled about and whom he tried to pass off as the re-incarnated Helen, the female 'thought of God to his First Man' . . . This obviously will not fit Prometheus and the demure, rather schoolgirlish Asia.[166]

Evidently Shelley was not in touch with the sexual extremism of the Muggletonians! Just as Milton was willing to imagine a physical mechanism of angelic excretion (*Paradise Lost*, v. 438) so Thomas Tomkinson was prepared to imagine God entering Mary's body and turning himself into semen: 'by virtue of his Godhead Power Entered into the narrow passage of the Blessed Virgin Mary's Womb. And so dissolved himself into Seed and Nature and clothed Himself with Flesh and Blood and Bone as with a Garment . . .'.[167] E. P. Thompson sees an analogy between the entry of the serpent into Eve's womb in certain versions of the Genesis story and the entry of God into Mary's womb at the Incarnation. Meanwhile when Blake drew his picture of the naked Eve with the beautiful (phallic?) serpent curving round her, he seems almost to have subjected the Muggletonian imagery to an Ophitic redaction.

Similarly extreme conceptions can be found in the Gnostics. Hippolytus in his 'Refutation of All Heresies' cites from the Naassene commentary on a Phrygian hymn to Attis: 'In the Temple of the Samothracians are erected two statues of naked men, with both hand, [*sic*] raised towards heaven and with their male members erect, like the statue of Hermes in Cyllene. These statues are images of the First Man and of the regenerated spiritual man who in every respect possesses the same nature as the First One.'[168] David Erdman and Peter Ackroyd

[166] *The Mutiny Within*, p. 140.
[167] Quoted in Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 77.
[168] Cited by R. M. Grant in his *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961), p. 107.

both think that Plate 32A for *Milton* (Plate 5, in this book), in which Blake shows himself with arms ecstatically outstretched as Milton, the star, falls towards his foot, shows the poet with an erect penis[169] (to my eye the drawing is hesitant and uncertain). Ackroyd says that this signifies Blake's rejection of the repressive ethic. The Apocalypse of Adam (or Revelation of Adam), one of the Nag Hammadi texts which must be earlier—perhaps much earlier—than AD 350, gives, as one of a series of accounts of the Incarnation,

> The tenth Kingdom says of him
> His god became enamoured of a cloud of desire.
> and produced him into his hand
> And he ejaculated an additional quantity of the
> droplet upon the cloud[170]

Andrew Welburn says of this passage, 'We should not be shocked by the divine masturbation'.[171] Shelley, I imagine, would have been a little shocked. Blake, on the other hand, would take it in his stride. It is strange to encounter material of this sort after years of explaining, laboriously, to students that phrases like 'Pious Ejaculations' on seventeenth-century title-pages carry no erotic meaning whatever. Indeed, almost always this remains true. Jonathan Goldberg's 'discovery' of an allusion to masturbation on the title-page of Herbert's *The Temple* remains a monument of twentieth-century misreading.[172]

(v) Contraries

I have argued that what looks, in Blake's writing, like an onslaught on morality itself can turn out to be an (ethically conventional) attack on cruelty or tyranny, but that, meanwhile, the Blakean privileging of energy is real ethical revolution; if we are to prefer strenuous ferocity to mild submission,

169 See *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David V. Erdman (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 248; Ackroyd, *Blake*, p. 311.

170 Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, p. 62.

171 *The Beginnings of Christianity: Essene Mystery, Gnostic Revelation and the Christian Vision* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1991), p. 47.

172 *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance Texts* (New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. 110–11.

then Jehovah, the hated Father–God, may after all be preferable to Christ, the Lamb of God. The attempt in *America*, *Europe*, and *Vala, or The Four Zoas* to differentiate the (bad) cold fury of Urizen from the (possibly good) warm fury of Orc cannot in the end resolve the difficulty. All fury involves energy and to this Blake must defer. I do not think that Blake knew the answer to this problem. But there is a poem in which he faces it, with a strange, oblique honesty:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare sieze the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars thew down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger, Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

(E, pp. 24–5)

I have given the version in *The Songs of Experience*. I know of no other lyric which has this effect of thunderous power, unless perhaps it is Dunbar's 'Done is a battell on the dragon blak'. But, while the Scottish poem is a succession of triumphant assertions, Blake's poem is made of questions. Blake's very doubts are stronger, somehow, than the most violent asseverations of other poets. The language is simple but it is not a

Wordsworthian simplicity. This is a poem designed to blow a huge hole in the (as yet unpublished) *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth hoped for a simplicity which would reflect the elemental character of emotion and visible nature; Blake goes instead for the simplicity of myth, a simplicity which from the outset enigmatically rejoices in an implied, indefinite significance. Both Wordsworth and Blake draw on the diction of children and Sunday School hymn books. But in Blake we sense that the simplicity may at any moment be ironized. It is never less than oracular.

Yet there is great honesty here. Blake has frightened himself; 'In what furnace was thy brain?' may bear an extra reference to the tormented mind of the poet himself. It may be said that this poem does not compare God the Father with the Son but only the tiger with the lamb. That is true, but it is evident that here the two principles are opposed. Moreover, the poem as it appears in *Songs of Experience* is clearly presented as an answer to 'Little Lamb who made thee?' in *Songs of Innocence* (E, p. 8). There the God who made the lamb is himself the Lamb, Christ:

> He is called by thy name,
> For he calls himself a Lamb:
> He is meek & he is mild,
> He became a little child . . .

If God the Lamb made the lamb, surely it must have been the Tiger God, a God of wrath, who made the tiger. But Blake is unwilling, one suspects, to pursue this thought to the point of rehabilitating Nobodaddy in the clouds. The negative implications of restraint and prohibition—even where such prohibition is exercised with passion—hold him back. Rather he would have us think that the tiger is the very passion which the Father–God, the enemy of life and turbulence, would wish to crush. That is why 'The Tyger' cannot after all end in parallel with its sister poem, 'The Lamb', cannot end by ascribing ferocity on earth to the most obvious image of divine ferocity. Nevertheless in this poem Blake's mind is shaken. The answer to the final question, however, 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' is probably 'Yes. He who made the lamb *did* make the tiger'.

I take the injunction, 'Sooner murder an infant . . .' to be the point of maximum immoralism in Blake. Even here, note, we do not have pure, unashamed Satanism ('Evil, be thou my good', *Paradise Lost*, iv. 110). Blake's thought is controlled and channelled back into the field of ethics by a persisting allegiance or deference to a *value* which he finds in life or in energy. Something after all is still implicitly forbidden: *cold* cruelty, for example. That is why I wrote, earlier in this book, that those who condemn the law of 'thou-shalt-not', preferring the positive doctrine of love, are themselves committed, in fact, to a new 'thou-shalt-not', namely, 'Thou shalt not hate'.

Blake writes, 'From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell' (*MHH*, Plate 3, E, p. 34). He is saying 'Good' is bad and 'Evil' is good. The inverted commas are of crucial importance. Without them he would be saying, as Satan said in *Paradise Lost*, iv. 110, that he places a high value upon (real) evil and a low upon (real) good. Instead Blake only claims to despise *so-called* 'good' and to exalt *so-called* 'evil'. Blake himself is actually very shaky on inverted commas. It may be that in the last sentence quoted both the adjectives should be in inverted commas, since otherwise Blake is merely enunciating a truism. This means that if Heaven is 'good', in inverted commas, it is really the bad, lifeless place and, in like manner, if Hell is 'evil', in inverted commas, it will really be the good place, the place of life.

Many may feel that such language is on the point of meltdown. If we say that Hell is really good, what is the meaning of 'good' in this new sentence? After all, the meaning of a word is determined by the uses to which it is normally put. Yet the normal use of the word seems to have been erased by the destructive fire of Blake's scepticism. If 'good' is no longer allowed to imply 'conformity to the moral law' or 'opposition to violent cruelty' for example, but is now to be 'cashed' in terms of the known characteristics of hell, then, once more, a seemingly subversive sentence will simply collapse into an inert, unsurprising tautology: 'heaven has the characteristics of heaven; hell of hell'. Pope and Archbishop smile and nod assent. Clearly Blake does not want *that*. When he says that

hell is good the word must carry, as a minimum, a charge of *approval*; he is saying, 'You ought to prefer hell', and when we ask why we ought, we encounter, as we have seen, a covert appeal to certain quasi-aesthetic values: energy, life, splendour, etc. If 'good' had been absolutely inverted by Blake, ordinary people could deal with the phenomenon by effortlessly reversing the reversal: 'I see; when Mr Blake says that ferocity is good, because he has also explained that "good" in his usage means what ordinary people mean by "bad" we can infer that, in our language, his sentence means "Ferocity is bad".' Thus Blake's inversion must never be absolute, must always be partial. Some toe-hold in existing value-responses must be retained. The same analysis must be applied to Blake's marginal note on Lavater, 'Active Evil is better than Passive Good' (no. 409, E, p. 592). But when all this is said, a remarkable degree of inversion is intermittently attained by Blake. This in its turn, however, proves vulnerable to metaphysical undermining of a different kind.

Blake does not confine himself to arguing for the overthrow of the morality of control and its replacement by the morality of freedom (a hyperbolical extension of the key ethical term of *Paradise Lost*). He also steps back and argues for the meta-principle of tense opposition as valuable in itself: 'Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence' (*MHH*, Plate 3, E, p. 34). The term 'contraries' seems to have grown from Blake's increasingly antagonistic engagement with Swedenborg. When Swedenborg wrote of opposition to the Order and Form of Heaven, Blake commented, 'Heaven & Hell are born together' (Annotations to Swedenborg's *Divine Love*, E, p. 609). Earlier he had commented, 'Good and Evil are here both Good & the two contraries Marrie' (E, p. 604). The word 'contrary' figures importantly in the writings of the Ranter Joseph Bauthumley, for example, 'Herein is God glorified in sinne, as contraries set together illustrate one another'.[173] There is also, for those interested in remoter pre-echoes, the term *syzygy*, 'yoking-together', associated with *dyad*, 'duality'.

[173] *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 244.

Irenaeus says that *syzygy* was an important concept in Valentinian Gnosticism.[174] 'Contraries' as used by Blake provides a covering rationale (how Blake would have hated that word) for the *aporia* of 'The Tyger'. But there is a danger that the stirring inverse hierarchies of Blake's revolutionary morality will, in consequence, be replaced by a bland egalitarianism of the spirit: 'It takes all sorts to make a world'. Blake could welcome the legitimation of the tiger but other implications of this new doctrine might be less congenial. It means for example that we need Urizen as much as we need Los, that we need control as much as we need release, we need rational incredulity as much as we need faith; Satan needs God the Father as much as God the Father needs Satan. Ontologically the heroes and villains of Blake's moral mythology suddenly find that they are all equal.

As with morality so with Blakean anti-rationality. It might be supposed that Blake's hostility to reason is so fundamental as to render any attempt to summarize his doctrine futile: 'If you think you can state Blake's doctrine you have obviously missed the point; Blake rejected the very concept of "doctrine".' Even if this were true, it would be open to a swift reply, 'That is merely anti-doctrinal doctrine; anti-doctrine and meta-doctrine are simply doctrines of another kind; in the twentieth century the anti-metaphysical philosophy of the Logical Positivists turned out to be itself a metaphysic.' In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake asks the question, 'Does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?' and Isaiah answers, 'All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains . . .' (Plate 12, E, pp. 38–9). This looks like the kind of disabling absoluteness that I tried to rule out from Blake's ethics. Since different human beings can have different and opposite convictions, the law of contradiction is abolished as soon as we translate their beliefs into fact, as Isaiah would have us do. Presumably Adolf Hitler was firmly persuaded of the wickedness of the Jews—felt in his gut that they were vile.

Suppose one person is firmly persuaded that strong conviction

174 *Adversus Haereses*, I. xi, ed. Rousseau, vol. i, p. 167. See also I. ii. 5 (vol. i, p. 45); I. viii. 4 (vol. i, p. 128); I. xi. 11 (vol. i, p. 180).

that a thing is so makes it really so, as Blake's Isaiah suggests, while another person is equally convinced that this is not the case. Then by Isaiah's own rule the second party is right when he says that firm conviction *doesn't* make a thing so. That way madness lies. We can be sure that in practice Blake would have ruled against *some* firm convictions, roundly affirming that they were lies in the old robust sense of the word. Otherwise indeed it would be impossible for anyone to summarize his thought. It would also be impossible for Blake himself to *assert* anything at all.

Similar difficulties are prompted by Blake's use of the word 'imagination'. E. P. Thompson has remarked on the way 'imagination' tends to replace 'faith' in the writings of seventeenth-century Protestants.[175] The Blakean passage on 'firm perswasion' may look like a late reversal of this trend, since 'perswasion' probably retains some of the force of Protestant 'assurance'. 'Assurance' (of election, of God's favour, and the like) was systematically applied to situations where in fact no certainty was to be had. By that pre-emptive logic which led us earlier to see in Faustus's conviction of his damnation a sign that he was damned indeed, a firm assurance of election was seen as a mark of election. The whole scene is fraught with danger, however, because 'confidence of election' (if after all it is insecurely based) turns at once into the sin of presumptuousness.

But in Blake the notion of firm persuasion is moving away from theology towards epistemology; he is interested in the possibility of an immediate coalescence of subjective certainty with reality. Therefore, in a manner which tends ultimately to confirm the intuition of E. P. Thompson, Blake's 'firm perswasion' is itself here taking on the force of the *epistemologically constitutive imagination* of high English Romanticism (Coleridge's 'primary imagination' is 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception'[176]). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the tantalizing idea grew that the imagination—first in investing the dry data of science with

[175] *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 113.

[176] *Biographia Literaria*, ch. xiii, ed. G. Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1956), p. 167.

value and beauty but then in configurating the inchoate stream of impressions as stable objects—was proving to be an organ either of truth-perception or of truth-formation. But the word 'imagination' obstinately continued to carry an implication of fiction, of making things up. The long semantic history of the word, in which it had been for so long the natural antithesis of 'perception', could not be shed easily. The Romantics might have taken a different course in arguing with reductive science. Instead of fighting under the banner 'Imagination' they might have fought under the flag 'Experience', claiming that the scientists had blasphemed against *true* empiricism by artificially excluding the colours, smells, and tastes of real cognition as it is lived. Locke's doctrine of 'primary and secondary qualities'[177] was popularly understood as meaning that measurable qualities such as length, breadth, and weight were alone real; smells, tastes, and colours on the other hand were wholly subjective to the perceiver.

Never, it might be said, was there a more anti-empirical doctrine. For experience is made of colours, smells, and tastes. Keats in his celebrated letter to his clerical friend Benjamin Bailey[178] seems for a moment to choose the flag 'Experience': 'Oh, for a life of Sensations rather than Thoughts'.[179] But the main allegiance of the paragraph in which this sentence occurs is to imagination: 'The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.' Keats is struggling here for some kind of ontological transformation; he feels perhaps that once beauty and value have been *invented*—the element of invention is betrayed when he says, 'What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—*whether it existed before or not*' (my italics)—this invention is a kind of creation, a substantial addition to the fabric of reality. But the sense of miracle remains and discloses the persistent feeling that the imagination is, at root, an organ of fiction, of feigning, a way of saying that which is not the case.

David Hume, whose epistemology is much closer to

[177] *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II. viii. 7–10, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 134–5.

[178] 22 November 1817, letter no. 43 in *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–21*, ed. H. E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. i, pp. 183–7.

[179] Ibid., pp. 184–5.

Coleridge's than most people realize,[180] said that it is only through the exercise of imagination that we are able to arrive at the conception of stable public objects. But, where Coleridge might rejoice at such a proposition, Hume is evidently distressed by the implied element of fiction: 'We *feign* the continu'd existence of the objects of our senses'[181] (my italics). Thus, in Hume the idea that perception is infiltrated by imagination forms part of a *sceptical* argument as it does not in Coleridge. When Blake wrote,

> The Atoms of Democritus
> And Newtons Particles of light
> Are sands upon the Red sea shore
> Where Israels tents do shine so bright.
>
> ('Mock on mock on Voltaire Rousseau', E., p. 478)

he might have explained to a reader that the passage expressed the fact that Imagination had disclosed to him, William Blake, wonders which were invisible to Democritus and Newton. But the word 'Imagination' gives the scientist an easy reply: 'You mean that you are *imagining* these things?—Fine, imagine anything you like!'

When Blake says that he did not see in the sun rising a shape like a guinea but rather a multitude of the heavenly host (*A Vision of the Last Judgement*, E, pp. 565–6), he is partly confessing, almost wilfully, that he prefers fictive imagination to sense perception (the senses are disparaged, on the same page, as the 'Corporeal and Vegetative Eye'). One senses that he knows perfectly well that most people see a golden disc; if that were not the case, if all saw as he saw, he would not 'score' with the brilliance of his conception, there would be no bravura, no feat of the imagination. In Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* the narrator Roquentin makes much of the falsity of ordinary perception, alleging that if we really look hard enough at the world 'things' as ordinarily understood rot or melt away, leaving us with an intuition of a terrifying viscosity; he proceeds to narrate, not without a certain quiet pride in his

[180] In Norman Kemp Smith's *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1966) the chapter on abstract ideas is prefixed by a quotation from Coleridge about the necessary place of imagination in all thought.

[181] *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I. iv. 6, ed. Selby-Bigge, p. 254.

own epistemological heroism, an occasion when he boarded a tram and saw that the tram seat before him was not really a tram seat at all, but a bleeding belly.[182] The interesting thing about such moments of disclosure is that they cannot be conveyed to the reader without some recourse to—and therefore, by implication, some trust in—the truth-telling power of ordinary object-language. Yet the content of the disclosure itself, the more fundamental truth we are to learn, is that all ordinary object-language is mendacious. It is obviously vital to the mechanics of the demonstration offered by Sartre–Roquentin that the reader should know that Roquentin was on a tram (ordinary object) at the time and not, say, standing in (ordinary language) a butcher's shop. So with Blake. He must tell us in ordinary language which Democritus and Newton would both understand at once that he was (really) looking at the sun rising before he conducts us to the extra, transcending miracle of the imagined heavenly host.

Blake gave the natural world (the 'Vegetative world') away to the scientist and then sought furiously to make good his losses by affirming that the rest, the poet's universe, was in fact more real. Famously he dissociated himself, in the name of imagination, from Wordsworth's allegiance to nature: 'Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me' (*Annotations to 'Poems' by William Wordsworth*, E, p. 655). When the counter-assertion is at its strongest, Blake becomes aware that, because the term 'imagination' concedes its own unreality, he must substitute 'vision', a *cognitive* word. 'Vision', unlike 'perception', has religious connotations; it suggests a transcendent object. There is a certain exaggerative hysteria in the way Blake's mind works here. The odd thing is that there is a sense in which all his difficulties spring from too great an initial deference to the scientific reductionists. Why should we assume that the scientists have got the natural corporeal world right? It will be obvious to the reader that my sympathies lie with the Wordsworthian project (inept and fumbling though it frequently is) to reassert mystery and beauty within the world of natural experience; after all, the scientist is patently incapable, it might be said, of

[182] *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), p. 159

giving an accurate account of what it is actually like to go for a walk in the country. No doubt I take this line because I am the kind of empiricist who has never accepted, as a fundamental ontology, the seventeenth-century reduction of experience to measurable *quanta*, the reduction of the experiential to the experimentally usable. As it is, there is something shrill about Blake's reply, 'My dream is stronger than your percept! My dream is a Vision!'

The knowledge of the scientist cannot after all be effectively countered by mere imagining. Knowledge must be met and thrown back by another, stronger knowledge. Wordsworth (who loved geometry and revered Isaac Newton) sought to form a counter-knowledge which was tenderly inclusive. Blake's violent, polarizing intelligence found in the old Gnostic contempt for nature a protective colour for *his* response: the *gnosis* of eternity obliterates the frail, stunted products of perception by way of the five senses. That is why Damrosch was wrong when he said that Blake is separated from the Gnostics by his insistence on 'this-worldly' truth.[183] This recoil from the Miltonic free exercise of reason 'in the field of this world' (*Areopagitica*, *CPW*, vol. xi, p. 514), from the Ranters' pantheistic glory in the ivy on the wall[184] to the empty, untestable complexities of the pleromatic realm, is at last a kind of betrayal. As long as Blake, like Bauthumley, is seeing eternity in a grain of sand, all is well. But when he sees eternity alone, perhaps inevitably we lose him. As long as the Puritan habit of opening one's meditation from a concrete, remembered moment persists, the rupture with Wordsworth is incomplete. The ray of light which fell on Blake's foot in *Milton* may have been a moment of epiphany directly analogous to a visitation of Grace in the seventeenth century or a renewal of imagination (through, say, an encounter with a transfigured, solitary person) in Wordsworth. But I am forced to write 'may have', and this in itself is significant. Where Wordsworth would have made the concrete, originative occasion the heart of his poem, Blake barely touches upon it (so that we are not certain that it

[183] *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*, p. 257. See above, p. 222.

[184] Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 232.

actually happened 'in time' at all) before winging his way into the Empyrean of the Eternals. Blake's poetry is most memorable, most moving, when he intercuts the sounding nomenclature of his strange mythology with familiar London names, as Abiezer Coppe had before, or when we glimpse a more rural England, still accessible on foot from London in Blake's time:

> The Ponds where Boys to bathe delight:
> The fields of Cows by Willans farm:
> Shine in Jerusalems pleasant sight.
>
> (*Jerusalem*, Plate 27, lines 14–16, E, p. 172)

But there are long stretches of his prophetic writing where all reference to London, to England, to Blake's friends and acquaintances, to the history of Christianity, to politics, to the rise of science seems lost; meanwhile the lines surge on, with apparently inexhaustible vigour.

I do not say that good poetry must always be empirical, can never engage with metaphysics. Blake is in fact a metaphysician of genius. As long as his thought is, so to speak, stiffened by an element of antagonism (for example, by fierce scrutiny of the presuppositions of other despised ontologies) the proper Blakean excitement is maintained. 'Pantheistic movement from the given particular to the divine, laced with dazzling critical metaphysics' seems to me no bad description of Blake at his best. I am enough of a Popperian to want to know, always, 'What would it be like for this proposition not to be true?' But the violent exaltation, without any willingness to negotiate, of the imagined over the experienced led him into a world in which narrative ramified endlessly, because there was no longer anything to impede it. Blake skates away from us, over the smooth ice of the unverifiable. We need some purchase on the world we know. As Wittgenstein said, 'Back to the rough-ground!'[185]

A similar duality can be found in Blake's graphic art. On the one hand we have the marvellously grainy woodcuts to Thornton's *Virgil*, which, cramped as they are, have something of the concrete visionary quality of Samuel Palmer. On the

[185] *Philosophical Investigations*, i. 107, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 46.

other hand we have the endlessly elaborated sub-Michelangelesque nude figures in indeterminate darkness, which plunge and entwine through page after page of the Prophetic Books—'bombinating in a vacuum'—eccentric, certainly, but artistically null. We cannot represent this as a linear development, the concrete vision fatally engulfed by the abstract; the woodcuts for Thornton's *Virgil*, for example, are late (1820). Nor would I deny power to each and every one of the more purely mythical drawings. There is one particular bodily posture: a figure seen from in front, sitting, head bowed on mighty knees, face hidden, which has great force. See, for an example, the angel-giant in the frontispiece to *America: A Prophecy* (see Plate 6). Part of this power is derived no doubt from a continuing reference to humanity (the invisible face is tantalizing, the posture is eloquent of despair or of profound reflection) but, equally certainly, power also flows from the operation of certain impersonal laws of linear composition. A general contrast remains, however, between such drawings as that of the fairy-angel in the frond of the plant in *Europe*[186] and *The Traveller hasteth in the Evening*, one of the engravings done for *The Gates of Paradise*. The traveller leans forward; there is speckled foliage behind him, blades of grass under his feet. Most wonderfully, he wears a big black hat, a hat which belongs to Blake's own age and country. The hat brings the picture to life (similarly, the more purely mythological picture of Los at the threshold, the frontispiece to *Jerusalem, the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, is saved by an English 'rural hat'). David Erdman notes the resemblance between the drawing of 'the Traveller' and Blake's design showing 'the wicket gate' in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Perhaps the concretizing side of Blake's art was revived by memories of Bunyan's people, their allegorical names always preceded by the sturdily bourgeois 'Mr'. In much the same way, Blake's picture of a robed figure, *Aged Ignorance*, for the relatively early (1793) *Gates of Paradise* is enlivened by a pair of spectacles and a Struwwelpeter-ish pair of scissors (see Plate 7).

When the figures lose their hats, their few clothes, their

[186] Reproduced in David Bindman, *The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), no. 176.

temporal and local settings, though the artist may be as busily keen as ever, for us they lose force. I am suggesting that Blake's convulsive, hyperbolical, initial concession to the scientists of the empirical world, followed by the counter-assertion of an ultra-empirical world, left him in an enervating medium of endlessly multipliable private images, a subjective universe. A wholly reasonable reply to my claim might be, 'How do you know that Blake did not in fact see into another world, that he is not truthfully reporting the doings of beings who really existed (quite apart from their functions within *our* patterns of thought as metaphors of poetic vision, moral tyranny and so forth)? Could it not be that all this seems empty to you only because you have not seen this world yourself?' To this I have no answer.

Meanwhile it seems to me beyond doubt that Blake's Trinity is the adversarial Trinity of Gnosticism. The Son is preferred to the Father. The Holy Ghost, about whom this book has had too little to say, appears in Blake as a flawed presence. Protestant Grace is reconstrued as imagination and then, as the fictive implications of 'imagination' prove inexpugnable, reconstrued once more as vision. I have emphasized the version of the Trinity in which the Father is degraded, but I have had to acknowledge that there is in Gnosticism a built-in tendency to multiply pre-cosmogonies, so that in the pleromatic realm a harmonious Trinity, with the true God at its head, is after all proposed. But I contend that the real vigour of the Gnostic heresy, as it operates in history, will be found in the subversive workings of the secondary, derivate Trinity in which the God–Man is affirmed and war is declared on the old father–tyrant.

It may be that there is a fundamental impulse in many cultures to say simultaneously 'We live under a tyrant' and 'The true king is good but lives far away'. If a secular equivalent is sought, the seemingly subversive, democratic legend of Robin Hood gives us indeed bad King John, oppressing the people, but also, at the same time, good King Richard Coeur de Lion, far away in the Holy Land. Maurice Keen observes that in medieval England the peasantry believed unshakably in the justice of the king but considered his officers corrupt.[187] I

[187] *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 156.

remember that at the time of the student uprisings in the late 1960s one often heard the view that the Vice-Chancellor was really a good person but the Registrar and officers of the university were the cause of all the trouble. By this analogy, the tyrant Jehovah, Ialdabaoth, Nobodaddy is merely the Registrar of the cosmic university. In practice, however, the opposition to the immediately available ruler really can produce politically revolutionary thoughts. Even monist, Arian Milton was surprised by the element of Gnosticism in his own mind into a kind of revolution within the Godhead. Meanwhile the political Milton was, straightforwardly, the heroic antagonist of monarchical power. Blake, though no activist, was clearly the enemy of kings, bishops, and all institutional authority. The marriage of these political views with his belligerent contempt for old Nobodaddy and his love of Christ is unproblematic.

Gnosticism came before *Paradise Lost* but, for English culture, Milton, much more than Blake, is the great seed-bed and forcing-house of these ideas. We should not leave the subject without noticing, as a sort of footnote, that one of the strangest of all trinities appears, *en passant*, in Book II of *Paradise Lost*. Satan, we are told, is the father of Sin, whom he begets upon Death as God begat the Son upon Mary, the 'Second Eve' (v. 387). Sin, addressing her father, parodies the words of the Nicene Creed, 'on the right hand of the Father', when she says,

> I shall reign
> At thy right hand voluptuous, as beseems
> Thy daughter and thy darling, without end.
>
> (ii. 868–70)

Alastair Fowler comments, 'In Sin's fantasy . . . Satan, Sin and Death form a complete anti-Trinity. Even the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father through the Son has its counterpart, in the begetting of Death by Satan on his own daughter.'[188] Here the poetry is for once on the side of God the Father. Milton, who seemingly could not bring himself

[188] *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. Carey and Fowler, p. 547. See also B. Rajan, *Paradise Lost and the Seventeenth Century Reader* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), pp. 47–8, 50, and A. N. Didron, *Christian Iconography*, trans. E. J. Millington, 2 vols. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851–86), vol. ii, pp. 21–2.

to present Adam at the moment of the Fall as deviously lustful but instead showed a loving husband, here clearly gives us a repellent, incestuous, parodic daughter–Son. At the same time, however, the passage is clear evidence that what C. S. Lewis thought was not just disapproved but unthinkable in the seventeenth century could in fact be thought—even if it is no sooner thought than condemned. Since the rest of *Paradise Lost* shows us a God who implicitly endorses the sin induced by Satan and in so doing generates from his own substance a second self, in implicit contrast with the former, forbidding self, it is hard to be confident, at the last, that this, brief anti-Trinity is *entirely* a matter of hostile parody, that there is not an intuition of genuine similarity behind the harshly obtruded contrast.

Marlowe, Milton, and Blake are not obscure by-paths in the history of English literature. They are all major, central figures. If so much of their thought flowed from a different conception of the Trinity, then that different conception can itself no longer be considered 'cranky' or negligible. It is always, to be sure, palpably adversarial. It is the running antithesis, not the primary thesis, of our culture. When or if it becomes itself an orthodoxy, as in some places it already has, no doubt some other heresy will arise.

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